

Astounding SCIENCE FICTION®

August 1957 • 35 Cents



Brake BY POUL ANDERSON

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Title: The stainless steel rat

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Release date: February 13, 2023 [eBook #70034]

Language: English

Original publication: United States: Street & Smith Publications, Inc, 1957

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/70034

Credits: Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE
STAINLESS STEEL RAT ***

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT

BY HARRY HARRISON

Illustrated by Freas

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
Astounding Science Fiction August 1957.
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]**

When the office door opened suddenly I knew the game was up. It had been a money-maker—but it was all over. As the cop walked in I sat back in the chair and put on a happy grin. He had the same somber expression and heavy foot that they all have—and the same lack of humor. I almost knew to the word what he was going to say before he uttered a syllable.

"James Bolivar diGriz I arrest you on the charge—"

I was waiting for the word *charge*, I thought it made a nice touch that way. As he said it I pressed the button that set off the charge of black powder in the ceiling, the crossbeam buckled and the three-ton safe dropped through right on the top of the cop's head. He squashed very nicely, thank you. The cloud of plaster dust settled and all I could see of him was one hand, slightly crumpled. It twitched a bit and the index finger pointed at me accusingly. His voice was a little muffled by the safe and sounded a bit annoyed. In fact he repeated himself a bit.

"... On the charge of illegal entry, theft, forgery—"

He ran on like that for quite a while, it was an impressive list but I had heard it all before. I didn't let it interfere with my stuffing all the money from the desk drawers into my suitcase. The list ended with a new charge and I would swear on a stack of thousand credit notes *that* high that there was a hurt tone in his voice.

"In addition the charge of assaulting a police robot will be added to your record. This was foolish since my brain and larynx are armored and in my midsection—"

"That I know well, George, but your little two-way radio is in the top of your pointed head and I don't want you reporting to your friends just yet."

One good kick knocked the escape panel out of the wall and gave access to the steps to the basement. As I skirted the rubble on the floor the robot's fingers snapped out at my leg, but I had been waiting for that and they closed about two inches short. I have been followed by enough police robots to know by now how indestructible they are. You can blow them up or knock them down and they keep coming after you; dragging themselves by one good finger and spouting saccharine morality all the while. That's

what this one was doing. Give up my life of crime and pay my debt to society and such. I could still hear his voice echoing down the stairwell as I reached the basement.

Every second was timed now. I had about three minutes before they would be on my tail, and it would take me exactly one minute and eight seconds to get clear of the building. That wasn't much of a lead and I would need all of it. Another kick panel opened out into the label-removing room. None of the robots looked up as I moved down the aisle—I would have been surprised if they had. They were all low-grade M types, short on brains and good only for simple, repetitive work. That was why I hired them. They had no curiosity as to why they were taking the labels off the filled cans of azote fruits, or what was at the other end of the moving belt that brought the cans through the wall. They didn't even look up when I unlocked the Door That Was Never Unlocked that led through the wall. I left it open behind me as I had no more secrets now.

Keeping next to the rumbling belt, I stepped through the jagged hole I had chopped in the wall of the government warehouse. I had installed the belt too, this and the hole were the illegal acts that I had to do myself. Another locked door opened into the warehouse itself. The automatic fork-lift truck was busily piling cans onto the belt and digging fresh ones out of the ceiling-high piles. This fork-lift had hardly enough brains to be called a robot, it just followed taped directions to load the cans. I stepped around it and dog-trotted down the aisle. Behind me the sounds of my illegal activity died away. It gave me a warm feeling to still hear it going full blast like that.

It *had* been one of the nicest little rackets I had ever managed. For a small capital outlay I had rented the warehouse that backed on the government warehouse. A simple hole in the wall and I had access to the entire stock of stored goods, long-term supplies that I knew would be untouched for months or years in a warehouse this size. Untouched, that is, until I came along.

After the hole had been made and the belt installed it was just a matter of business. I hired the robots to remove the old labels and substitute the colorful ones I had printed. Then I marketed my goods in a strictly legal fashion. My stock was the best and due to my imaginative operation my costs were very low, I could afford to undersell my competitors and still make a handsome profit. The local wholesalers had been quick to sense a bargain and I had orders for months ahead. It *had* been a good operation—and could have gone on for quite a while.

I stifled that train of thought before it started. One lesson that has to be remembered in my line of business is that when an operation is over it is OVER! The temptation to stay just one more day or to cash just one more check can be almost overwhelming, ah, how well I know. I also know that it is also the best way to get better acquainted with the police.

*Turn your back and walk away—
And live to graft another day.*

That's my motto and it's a good one. I got where I am because I stuck to it. And daydreams aren't part of getting away from the police.

I pushed all thoughts from my mind as I reached the end of the aisle. The entire area outside must have been swarming with cops by this time and I had to move fast and make no mistakes. A fast look right and left. Nobody in sight. Two steps ahead and press the elevator button. I had put a meter on this back elevator and it showed that the thing was used once a month on the average.

It arrived in about three seconds, empty, and I jumped in, thumbing the roof button at the same time. The ride seemed to go on forever, but that was just subjective. By the record it was exactly fourteen seconds. This was the most dangerous part of the trip. I tightened up as the elevator slowed. My .75 caliber recoilless was in my hand, that would take care of one cop, but no more.

The door shuffled open and I relaxed. Nothing. They must have the entire area covered on the ground so they hadn't bothered to put cops on the roof.

In the open air now I could hear the sirens for the first time—a wonderful sound. They must have had half of the entire police force out from the amount of noise they were making. I accepted it as any artist accepts tribute.

The board was behind the elevator shaft where I had left it. A little weather-stained but still strong. A few seconds to carry it to the edge of the parapet and reach it across to the next building.

Gently, this was the one dangerous spot where speed didn't count. Carefully onto the end of the board, the suitcase held against my chest to keep my center of gravity over the board. One step at a time. A thousand-foot drop to the ground. If you don't look down you can't fall....

Over. Time for speed. The board behind the parapet, if they didn't see it at first my trail would be covered for a while at least. Ten fast steps and there was the door to the stairwell. It opened easily—and it better have—I had put enough oil on the hinges. Once inside I threw the bolt and took a long, deep breath. I wasn't out of it yet, but the worst part where I ran the most risk, was past. Two uninterrupted minutes here and they would never find James Bolivar, alias "Slippery Jim" diGriz.

The stairwell at the roof was a musty, badly lit cubicle that was never visited. I had checked it carefully a week before for phono and optic bugs and it had been clear. The dust looked undisturbed, except for my own footprints. I had to take a chance that it hadn't been bugged since then. The calculated risk must be accepted in this business.

Good-by James diGriz, weight ninety-eight kilos, age about forty-five, thick in the middle and heavy in the jowls, a typical business man whose picture graces the police files of a thousand planets—also his fingerprints. They went first. When you wear them they feel like a second skin, a touch of solvent though and they peel off like a pair of transparent gloves.

All my clothes next—and then the girdle in reverse—that lovely paunch that straps around my belly and holds twenty kilos of lead mixed with thermite. A quick wipe from the bottle of bleach and my hair was its natural shade of brown, the eyebrows, too. The nose plugs and cheek pads hurt coming out, but that only lasts a second. Then the blue-eyed contact lenses. This process leaves me mother-naked and I always feel as if I have been born again. In a sense it is true, I had become a new man, twenty kilos lighter, ten years younger and with a completely different description. The large suitcase held a complete change of clothes and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses that replaced the contact lenses. All the loose money fitted neatly into a brief case.

When I straightened up I really felt as if ten years had been stripped from me. I was so used to wearing that weight that I never noticed it—until it was gone. Put a real spring in my step.

The thermite would take care of all the evidence, I kicked it all into a heap and triggered the fuse. It caught with a roar and bottles, clothes, bag, shoes, weights, et al, burned with a cheerful glare. The police would find a charred spot on the cement and micro-analysis might get them a few molecules off the walls, but that was all they would get. The glare of the burning thermite threw jumping shadows around me as I walked down three flights to the one hundred twelfth floor.

Luck was still with me, there was no one on the floor when I opened the door. One minute later the express elevator let me and a handful of other business types out into the lobby.

Only one door was open to the street and a portable TV camera was trained on it. No attempt was being made to stop people from going in and out of the building, most of them didn't even notice the camera and the little group of cops around it. I walked towards it at an even pace. Strong nerves count for a lot in this business.

For one instant I was square in the field of that cold, glass eye, then I was past. Nothing happened so I knew I was clear. That camera must have fed direct to the main computer at police headquarters, if my description had been close enough to the one they had on file those robots would have been notified and I would have been pinned before I had taken a step. You can't

outmove a computer-robot combination, not when they move and think in microseconds—but you can out-think them. I had done it again.

A cab took me about ten blocks away. I waited until it was out of sight then took another one. It wasn't until I was in the third cab that I felt safe enough to go to the space terminal. The sounds of sirens were growing fainter and fainter behind me and only an occasional police car tore by in the opposite direction.

They were sure making a big fuss over a little larceny, but that's the way it goes on these overcivilized worlds. Crime is such a rarity now that the police really get carried away when they run across some. In a way I can't blame them, giving out traffic tickets must be an awful dull job. I really believe they ought to thank me for putting a little excitement in their otherwise dull lives.

It was a nice ride to the spaceport being located, of course, far out of town. I had time to lean back and watch the scenery and gather my thoughts. Even time to be a little philosophical. For one thing I could enjoy a good cigar again, I smoked only cigarettes in my other personality and never violated that personality, even in strictest privacy. The cigars were still fresh in the pocket humidor where I had put them six months ago. I sucked a long mouthful and blew the smoke out at the flashing scenery. It was good to be off the job, just about as good as being on it. I could never make my mind up which period I enjoyed more—I guess they are both right at the time.

My life is so different from that of the overwhelming majority of people in our society that I doubt if I could even explain it to them. They exist in a fat, rich union of worlds that have almost forgotten the meaning of the word crime. There are few malcontents and even fewer that are socially maladjusted. The few that are still born in spite of centuries of genetic control are caught early and the aberration quickly adjusted. Some don't show their weakness until they are adults, they are the ones who try their hand at petty crime—burglary, shop-lifting or such. They get away with it for a week or two or a month or two, depending on the degree of their

native intelligence. But sure as atomic decay—and just as predestined—the police reach out and pull them in.

That is almost the full extent of crime in our organized, dandified society. Ninety-nine per cent of it, let's say. It is that last and vital one per cent that keeps the police departments in business. That one per cent is me, and a few others like me, a handful of men scattered around the galaxy. Theoretically we can't exist, and if we do exist we can't operate—but we do. We are the rats in the wainscoting of society—we operate outside of their barriers and outside of their rules. Society had more rats when the rules were looser, just as the old wooden buildings had more rats than the concrete buildings that came later. But they still had rats. Now that society is all ferroconcrete and stainless steel there are fewer gaps between the joints, and it takes a smart rat to find them. A stainless steel rat is right at home in this environment.

It is a proud and lonely thing to be a stainless steel rat—and it is the greatest experience in the galaxy if you can get away with it. The sociological experts can't seem to agree why we exist, some even doubt that we do. The most widely accepted theory says that we are victims of delayed psychological disturbance that shows no evidence in childhood when it can be detected and corrected and only appears later in life. I have naturally given a lot of thought to the topic and I don't hold with that idea at all.

A few years back I wrote a small book on the subject—under a nom de plume of course—that was rather well received. My theory is that the aberration is a philosophical one, not a psychological one. At a certain stage the realization struck through that one must either live outside of society's bonds or die of absolute boredom. There is no future or freedom in the circumscribed life and the only other life is complete rejection of the rules. There is no longer room for the soldier of fortune or the gentleman adventurer who can live both within and outside of society. Today it is all or nothing. To save my own sanity I chose the nothing.

The cab just reached the spaceport as I hit on this negative line of thought and I was glad to abandon it. Loneliness is the thing to fear in this business, that and self-pity can destroy you if they get the upper hand. Action has

always helped me, the elation of danger and escape always clears my mind. When I paid the cab I shortchanged the driver right under his nose, palming one of the credit notes in the act of handing it to him. He was blind as a riveted bulkhead, his gullibility had me humming with delight. The tip I gave him more than made up the loss since I only do this sort of petty business to break the monotony.

There was a robot clerk behind the ticket window, he had that extra third eye in the center of his forehead that meant a camera. It clicked slightly as I purchased a ticket recording my face and destination. A normal precaution on the part of the police, I would have been surprised if it hadn't happened. My destination was intersystem so I doubted if the picture would appear any place except in the files. I wasn't making an interstellar hop this time, as I usually did after a big job, it wasn't necessary. After a job a single world or a small system is too small for more work, but Beta Cygnus has a system of almost twenty planets all with terrafied weather. This planet, III, was too hot now, but the rest of the system was wide open. There was a lot of commercial rivalry within the system and I knew their police departments didn't co-operate too well. They would pay the price for that. My ticket was for Mori, number XVIII, a large and mostly agricultural planet.

There were a number of little stores at the spaceport, I shopped them carefully and outfitted a new suitcase with a complete wardrobe and traveling essentials. The tailor was saved for last. He ran up a couple of traveling suits and a formal kilt for me and I took them into the fitting booth. Strictly by accident I managed to hang one of the suits over the optic bug in the wall and made undressing sounds with my feet while I doctored the ticket I had just bought. The other end of my cigar cutter was a punch, with it I altered the keyed holes that indicated my destination. I was now going to planet X, not XVIII, and I had lost almost two hundred credits with the alteration. That's the secret of ticket and order changing, don't raise the face value—there is too good a chance that this will be noticed. If you lower the value and lose money on the deal, even if it is caught, people will be sure it is a mistake on the machine's part. There is never the shadow of a doubt, since why should anyone change a ticket to lose money?

Before the police could be suspicious I had the suit off the bug and tried it on, taking my time. Almost everything was ready now, I had about an hour to kill before the ship left. I spent the time wisely by going to an automatic

cleaner and having all my new clothes cleaned and pressed. Nothing interests a customs man more than a suitcase full of unworn clothes.

Customs was a snap and when the ship was about half full I boarded her and took a seat near the hostess. I flirted with her until she walked away, having classified me in the category of MALE, BRASH, ANNOYING. An old girl who had the seat next to mine also had me filed in the same drawer and was looking out of the window with obvious ice on her shoulder. I dozed off happily since there is one thing better than not being noticed and that is being noticed and filed into a category. Your description gets mixed up with every other guy in the file and that is the end of it.

When I woke up we were almost to planet X, I half dozed in the chair until we touched down, then smoked a cigar while my bag cleared customs. My locked brief case of money raised no suspicions since I had foresightedly forged papers six months ago with my occupation listed as *bank messenger*. Interplanet credit was almost nonexistent in this system, so the customs men were used to seeing a lot of cash go back and forth.

Almost by habit I confused the trail a little more and ended up in the large manufacturing city of Brough over one thousand kilometers from the point where I had landed. Using an entirely new set of identification papers I registered at a quiet hotel in the suburbs.

Usually after a big job like this I rest up for a month or two; this was one time though I didn't feel like a rest. While I was making small purchases around town to rebuild the personality of James diGriz, I was also keeping my eyes open for new business opportunities. The very first day I was out I saw what looked like a natural—and each day it looked better and better.

One of the main reasons I have stayed out of the arms of the law for as long as I have, is that I have never repeated myself. I have dreamed up some of the sweetest little rackets, run them off once, then stayed away from them forever after. About the only thing they had in common was the fact that they all made money. About the only thing I hadn't hit to date was out and out armed robbery. It was time for a change and it looked like that was it.

While I was rebuilding the paunchy personality of Slippery Jim I was making plans for the operation. Just about the time the fingerprint gloves were ready the entire business was planned. It was simple like all good operations should be, the less details there are, the less things there are that can go wrong.

I was going to hold up Moraio's, the largest retail store in the city. Every evening, at exactly the same time, an armored car took the day's receipts to the bank. It was a tempting prize—a gigantic sum in untraceable small bills. The only real problem as far as I was concerned was how one man could handle the sheer bulk and weight of all that money. When I had an answer to that the entire operation was ready.

All the preparations were, of course, made only in my mind until the personality of James diGriz was again ready. The day I slipped that weighted belly back on, I felt I was back in uniform. I lit my first cigarette almost with satisfaction, then went to work. A day or two for some purchases and a few simple thefts and I was ready. I scheduled the following afternoon for the job.

A large tractor-truck that I had bought was the key to the operation—along with some necessary alterations I had made to the interior. I parked the truck in an "L" shaped alley about a half mile from Moraio's. The truck almost completely blocked the alley but that wasn't important since it was used only in the early morning. It was a leisurely stroll back to the department store, I reached it at almost the same moment that the armored truck pulled up. I leaned against the wall of the gigantic building while the guards carried out the money. My money.

To someone of little imagination I suppose it would have been an awe-inspiring sight. At least five armed guards standing around the entrance, two more inside the truck as well as the driver and his assistant. As an added precaution there were three monocycles purring next to the curb, they would go with the truck as protection on the road. Oh, very impressive. I had to stifle a grin behind my cigarette when I thought about what was going to happen to those elaborate precautions.

I had been counting the hand-trucks of money as they rolled out of the door. There were always fifteen, no more, no less; this practice made it easy for me to know the exact time to begin. Just as fourteen was being loaded into

the armored truck, load number fifteen appeared in the store entrance. The truck driver had been counting the way I had, he stepped down from the cab and moved to the door in the rear in order to lock it when loading was finished.

We synchronized perfectly as we strolled by each other. At the moment he reached the rear door I reached the cab, quietly and smoothly I climbed up into it and slammed the door behind me. The assistant had just enough time to open his mouth and pop his eyes when I placed an anesthetic bomb on his lap; he slumped in an instant. I was, of course, wearing the correct filter plugs in my nostrils. As I started the motor with my left hand I threw a larger bomb through the connecting window to the rear with my right. There were some reassuring thumps as the guards there dropped over the bags of change.

This entire process hadn't taken six seconds. The guards on the steps were just waking up to the fact that something was wrong. I gave them a cheerful wave through the window and gunned the armored truck away from the curb. One of them tried to run and throw himself through the open rear door but he was a little too late. It all had happened so fast that not one of them had thought to shoot, I had been sure there would be a *few* bullets. The sedentary life on these planets does slow the reflexes.

The monocycle drivers caught on a lot faster, they were after me before the truck had gone a hundred feet. I slowed down until they had caught up, then stamped on the accelerator, keeping just enough speed so they couldn't pass me.

Their sirens were screaming of course and they had their guns working; it was just as I had planned. We tore down the street like jet racers and the traffic melted away before us. They didn't have time to think and realize that *they* were making sure the road was clear for my escape. The situation was very humorous and I'm afraid I chuckled out loud as I tooled the truck around the tight corners.

Of course the alarm had been turned in and the road blocks must have been forming up ahead—but that half mile went by fast at the speed we were

doing. It was a matter of seconds before I saw the alley mouth ahead. I turned the truck into it, at the same time pressing the button on my pocket short wave.

Along the entire length of the alley my smoke bombs ignited. They were, of course, home made, as was all my equipment, nevertheless they produced an adequately dense cloud in that narrow alley. I pulled the truck a bit to the right until the fenders scraped the wall and only slightly reduced my speed, this way I could steer by touch. The monocycle drivers of course couldn't do this and had the choice of stopping or rushing headlong into the darkness. I hope they made the right decision and none of them were hurt.

The same radio impulse that triggered the bombs was supposed to have opened the rear door of the trailer truck up ahead and dropped the ramp. It had worked fine when I had tested it, I could only hope now that it did the same in practice. I tried to estimate the distance I had gone in the alley by timing my speed, but I was a little off. The front wheels of the truck hit the ramp with a destructive crash and the armored truck bounced rather than rolled into the interior of the larger van. I was jarred around a bit and had just enough sense left to jam on the brakes before I plowed right through into the cab.

Smoke from the bombs made a black midnight of everything, that and my shaken-up brains almost ruined the entire operation. Valuable seconds went by while I leaned against the truck wall trying to get oriented. I don't know how long it took, when I finally did stumble back to the rear door I could hear the guards' voices calling back and forth through the smoke. They heard the bent ramp creak as I lifted it so I threw two gas bombs out to quiet them down.

The smoke was starting to thin as I climbed up to the cab of the tractor and gunned it into life. A few feet down the alley and I broke through into sunlight. The alley mouth opened out into a main street a few feet ahead and I saw two police cars tear by. When the truck reached the street I stopped and took careful note of all witnesses. None of them showed any interest in the truck or the alley. Apparently all the commotion was still at the other end of the alley. I poured power into the engine and rolled out into the street, away from the store I had just robbed.

Of course I only went a few blocks in that direction then turned down a side street. At the next corner I turned again and headed back towards Moraio's, the scene of my recent crime. The cool air coming in the window soon had me feeling better, I actually whistled a bit as I threaded the big truck through the service roads.

It would have been fine to go up the highway in front of Moraio's and see all the excitement, but that would have been only asking for trouble. Time was still important. I had carefully laid out a route that avoided all congested traffic and this was what I followed. It was only a matter of minutes before I was pulling into the loading area in the back of the big store. There was a certain amount of excitement here but it was lost in the normal bustle of commerce. Here and there a knot of truck drivers or shipping foremen were exchanging views on the robbery, since robots don't gossip the normal work was going on. The men were, of course, so excited that no attention was paid to my truck when I pulled into the parking line next to the other vans. I killed the engine and settled back with a satisfied sigh.

The first part was complete. The second part of the operation was just as important though. I dug into my paunch for the kit that I always take on the job—for just such an emergency as this. Normally, I don't believe in stimulants, but I was still groggy from the banging around. Two cc's of Linoten in my ante cubital cleared that up quickly enough. The spring was back in my step when I went into the back of the van.

The driver's assistant and the guards were still out and would stay that way for at least ten hours. I arranged them in a neat row in the front of the truck where they wouldn't be in my way and went to work.

The armored car almost filled the body of the trailer as I knew it would; therefore I had fastened the boxes to the walls. They were fine, strong shipping boxes with Moraio's printed all over them. It was a minor theft from their warehouse that should go unnoticed. I pulled the boxes down and folded them for packing, I was soon sweating and had to take my shirt off as I packed the money bundles into the boxes.

It took almost two hours to stuff and seal the boxes with tape. Every ten minutes or so I would check through the peephole in the door; only the normal activities were going on. The police undoubtedly had the entire

town sealed and were tearing it apart building by building looking for the truck. I was fairly sure that the last place they would think of looking was the rear of the robbed store.

The warehouse that had provided the boxes had also provided a supply of shipping forms. I fixed one of these on each box, addressed to different pick-up addresses and marked paid of course, and was ready to finish the operation.

It was almost dark by this time, however I knew that the shipping department would be busy most of the night. The engine caught on the first revolution and I pulled out of the parking rank and backed slowly up to the platform. There was a relatively quiet area where the shipping dock met the receiving dock, I stopped the trailer as close to the dividing line as I could. I didn't open the rear door until all the workmen were faced in a different direction. Even the stupidest of them would have been interested in why a truck was unloading the firm's own boxes. As I piled them up on the platform I threw a tarp over them, it only took a few minutes. Only when the truck gates were closed and locked did I pull off the tarp and sit down on the boxes for a smoke.

It wasn't a long wait. Before the cigarette was finished a robot from the shipping department passed close enough for me to call him.

"Over there. The M-19 that was loading these burned out a brake-band, you better see that they're taken care of."

His eyes glowed with the light of duty. Some of these higher M types take their job very seriously. I had to step back quickly as the fork lifts and M-trucks appeared out of the doors behind me. There was a scurry of loading and sorting and my haul vanished down the platform. I lighted another cigarette and watched for a while as the boxes were coded and stamped and loaded on the outgoing trucks and local belts.

All that was left for me now was the disposing of the truck on some side street and changing personalities.

As I was getting into the truck I realized for the first time that something was wrong. I, of course, had been keeping an eye on the gate—but not watching it closely enough. Trucks had been going in and out. Now the realization hit me like a hammer blow over the solar plexus. They were the same trucks going both ways. A large, red cross-country job was just pulling out. I heard the echo of its exhaust roar down the street—then die away to an idling grumble. When it roared up again it didn't go away, instead the truck came in through the second gate. There were police cars waiting outside that wall. Waiting for me.

For the first time in my career I felt the sharp fear of the hunted man. This was the first time I had ever had the police on my trail when I wasn't expecting them. The money was lost, that much was certain, but I was no longer concerned with that. It was me they were after now.

Think first, then act. I was safe enough for the moment. They were, of course, moving in on me, going slowly as they had no idea of where I was in the giant loading yard. How had they found me? *That* was the important point. The local police were used to an almost crimeless world, they couldn't have found my trail this quick. In fact, I hadn't left a trail, whoever had set the trap here had done it with logic and reason.

Unbidden the words jumped into my mind.

The Special Corps.

Nothing was ever printed about it, only a thousand whispered words heard on a thousand worlds around the galaxy. The Special Corps, the branch of the League that took care of the troubles that individual planets couldn't solve. The Corps was supposed to have finished off the remnants of Haskell's Raiders after the peace, of putting the illegal T & Z Traders out of business, of finally catching Inskipp. And now they were after me.

They were out there waiting for me to make a break. They were thinking of all the ways out just as I was—and they were blocking them. I had to think fast and I had to think right.

Only two ways out. Through the gates or through the store. The gates were too well covered to make a break, in the store there would be other ways out. It had to be that way. Even as I made the conclusion I knew that other minds had made it too, that men were moving in to cover those exits. That

thought brought fear—and made me angry as well. The very idea that someone could out-think me was odious. They could try all right—but I would give them a run for their money. I still had a few tricks left.

First, a little misdirection. I started the truck, left it in low gear and aimed it at the gate. When it was going straight I locked the steering wheel with the friction clamp and dropped out the far side of the cab and strolled back to the warehouse. Once inside I moved faster. Behind me I heard some shots, a heavy crump, and a lot of shouting. That was more like it.

The night locks were connected on the doors that led to the store proper. An old-fashioned alarm that I could disconnect in a few moments. My pick-locks opened the door and I gave it a quick kick with my foot and turned away. There were no alarm bells, but I knew that somewhere in the building an indicator showed that the door was opened. As fast as I could run I went to the last door on the opposite side of the building. This time I made sure the alarm was disconnected before I went through the door. I locked it behind me.

It is the hardest job in the world to run and be quiet at the same time. My lungs were burning before I reached the employees' entrance. A few times I saw flashlights ahead and had to double down different aisles, it was mostly luck that I made it without being spotted. There were two men in uniform standing in front of the door I wanted to go out. Keeping as close to the wall as I could I made it to within twenty feet of them before I threw the gas grenade. For one second I was sure that they had gas masks on and I had reached the end of the road—then they slumped down. One of them was blocking the door, I rolled him aside and slid it open a few inches.

The searchlight couldn't have been more than thirty feet from the door; when it flashed on the light was more pain than glare. I dropped the instant it came on and the slugs from the machine pistol ate a line of glaring holes across the door. My ears were numb from the roar of the exploding slugs and I could just make out the thud of running footsteps. My own .75 was in my hand and I put an entire clip of slugs through the door, aiming high so I wouldn't hurt anyone. It would not stop them, but it should slow them down.

They returned the fire, must have been a whole squad out there. Pieces of plastic flew out of the back wall and slugs screamed down the corridor. It was good cover, I knew there was nobody coming up behind me. Keeping as flat as I could I crawled in the opposite direction, out of the line of fire. I turned two corners before I was far enough from the guns to risk standing up. My knees were shaky and great blobs of color kept fogging my vision. The searchlight had done a good job, I could barely see at all in the dim light.

I kept moving slowly, trying to get as far away from the gunfire as possible. The squad outside had fired as soon as I had opened the door, that meant standing orders to shoot at anyone who tried to leave the building. A nice trap. The cops inside would keep looking until they found me. If I tried to leave I would be blasted. I was beginning to feel very much like a trapped rat.

Every light in the store came on and I stopped, frozen. I was near the wall of a large farm-goods showroom. Across the room from me were three soldiers. We spotted each other at the same time, I dived for the door with bullets slapping all around me. The military was in it too, they sure must have wanted me bad. A bank of elevators was on the other side of the door—and stairs leading up. I hit the elevator in one bounce and punched the sub-basement button, and just got out ahead of the closing doors. The stairs were back towards the approaching soldiers, I felt like I was running right into their guns. I must have made the turn into the stairs a split second ahead of their arrival. Up the stairs and around the first landing before they were even with the bottom. Luck was still on my side. They hadn't seen me and were sure I had gone down. I sagged against the wall, listening to the shouts and whistle blowing as they turned the hunt towards the basement.

There was one smart one in the bunch. While the others were all following the phony trail I heard him start slowly up the stairs. I didn't have any gas grenades left, all I could do was climb up ahead of him, trying to do it without making a sound.

He came on slowly and steadily and I stayed ahead of him. We went up four flights that way, me in my stockinged feet with my shoes around my neck, his heavy boots behind me making a dull rasping on the metal stairs.

As I started up the fifth flight I stopped, my foot halfway up a step.

Someone else was coming down, someone wearing the same kind of military boots. I found the door to the hall, opened it behind me and slipped through. There was a long hall in front of me lined with offices of some kind. I began to run the length of it, trying to reach a turning before the door behind me could open and those exploding slugs tear me in half. The hall seemed endless and I suddenly realized I would never make it to the end in time.

I was a rat looking for a hole—and there was none. The doors were locked, all of them, I tried each as I came to it, knowing I would never make it. That stairwell door was opening behind me and the gun was coming up, I didn't dare turn and look but I could feel it. When the door opened under my hand I fell through before I realized what had happened. I locked it behind me and leaned against it in the darkness, panting like a spent animal.

Then the light came on and I saw the man sitting behind the desk, smiling at me.

There is a limit to the amount of shock the human body can absorb. I'd had mine. I didn't care if he shot me or offered a cigarette—I had reached the end of my line. He did neither. He offered me a cigar instead.

"Have one of these, diGriz, I believe they're your brand."

The body is a slave of habit, even with death a few inches away it will respond to established custom. My fingers moved of their own volition and took the cigar, my lips clenched it and my lungs sucked it into life. And all the time my eyes watched the man behind the desk waiting for death to reach out.

It must have shown. He waved towards a chair and carefully kept both hands in sight on top of the desk. I still had my gun, it was trained on him.

"Sit down diGriz and put that cannon away. If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it a lot easier than herding you into this room." His eyebrows moved up in surprise when he saw the expression on my face. "Don't tell me you thought it was an accident that you ended up here?"

I had, up until that moment, and the lack of intelligent reasoning on my part brought on a wave of shame that snapped me back to reality. I had been outwitted and outfought, the least I could do was surrender graciously. I threw the gun on the desk and dropped into the offered chair. He swept the pistol neatly into a drawer and relaxed a bit himself.

"Had me worried there for a minute, the way you stood there rolling your eyes and waving this piece of field artillery around."

"Who are you?"

He smiled at the abruptness of my tone. "Well, it doesn't matter who I am. What does matter is the organization that I represent."

"The Corps?"

"Exactly. The Special Corps. You didn't think I was the local police, did you? They have orders to shoot you on sight. It was only after I told them how to find you that they let the Corps come along on the job. I have some of my men in the building, they're the ones who herded you up here. The rest are all locals with itchy trigger fingers."

It wasn't very flattering but it was true. I had been pushed around like a class M robot, with every move charted in advance. The old boy behind the desk—for the first time I realized he was about sixty-five—really had my number. The game was over.

"All right Mr. Detective, you have me so there is no sense in gloating. What's next on the program? Psychological reorientation, lobotomy—or just plain firing squad?"

"None of those I'm afraid. I am here to offer you a job on the Corps."

The whole thing was so ludicrous that I almost fell out of the chair laughing. Me. James diGriz, the interplanet thief working as a policeman. It was just too funny. The other one sat patiently, waiting until I was through.

"I will admit it has its ludicrous side—but only at first glance. If you stop to think, you will have to admit that who is better qualified to catch a thief

than another thief?"

There was more than a little truth in that, but I wasn't buying my freedom by turning stool pigeon.

"An interesting offer, but I'm not getting out of this by playing the rat. There is even a code among thieves, you know."

That made him angry. He was bigger than he looked sitting down and the fist he shook in my face was as large as a shoe.

"What kind of stupidity do you call that? It sounds like a line out of a TV thriller. You've never met another crook in your whole life and you know it! And if you did you would cheerfully turn him in if you could make a profit on the deal. The entire essence of your life is individualism—that and the excitement of doing what others can't do. Well that's over now, and you better start admitting it to yourself. You can no longer be the interplanet playboy you used to be—but you *can* do a job that will require every bit of your special talents and abilities. Have you ever killed a man?"

His change of pace caught me off guard, I stumbled out an answer.

"No ... not that I know of."

"Well you haven't, if that will make you sleep any better at night. You're not a homicidal, I checked that on your record before I came out after you. That is why I know you will join the Corps and get a great deal of pleasure out of going after the *other* kind of criminal who is sick, not just socially protesting. The man who can kill and enjoy it."

He was too convincing, he had all the answers. I had only one more argument and I threw it in with the air of a last ditch defense.

"What about the Corps, if they ever find out you are hiring half-reformed criminals to do your dirty work we will both be shot at dawn."

This time it was his turn to laugh. I could see nothing funny so I ignored him until he was finished.

"In the first place my boy, *I* am the Corps—at least the man at the top—and what do you think *my* name is? Harold Peters Inskipp, that's what it is!"

"Not the Inskipp that—"

"The same. Inskipp the Uncatchable. The man who looted the Pharsydion II in mid-flight and pulled all those others deals I'm sure you read about in your misspent youth. I was recruited just the way you were."

He had me on the ropes. He must have seen my rolling eyes, so he moved in for the kill.

"And who do you think the rest of our agents are? I don't mean the bright-eyed grads of our technical schools, like the ones on my squad downstairs, I mean the full agents. The men who plan the operations, do the preliminary fieldwork and see that everything comes off smoothly. They're crooks. All crooks. The better they were on their own, the better a job they do for the Corps. It's a great, big, brawling universe and you would be surprised at some of the problems that come up. The only men we can recruit to do the job are the ones who have already succeeded at it.

"Are you on?"

It had happened too fast and I hadn't had time to think, I would probably go on arguing for an hour. But way down in the back of my mind the decision had been made. I was going to do it, I couldn't say no.

There was the beginning of a warm glow, too. The human race is gregarious, I knew that even though I had been denying it for years.

I was going to keep on doing the loneliest job in the universe—only I wasn't going to be doing it alone.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STAINLESS
STEEL RAT ***

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