

“THE BEST OF ...” collections are intended to present the representative stories of the masters of science fiction in chronological order, their aim being to provide science fiction readers with a selection of short stories that demonstrate the authors’ literary development and at the same time to provide new readers with a sound introduction to their work.

The collections were compiled with the help and advice of the authors concerned, together with the invaluable assistance of numerous fans, without whose good work, time and patience they would not have been published.

In particular the advice of Roger Peyton, Gerald Bishop, Peter Weston and Leslie Flood is appreciated.

ANGUS WELLS, *Editor*

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*A. E. van Vogt*  
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## Introduction

“BEST” is what is called in General Semantics a defining word. What this means is that the word of itself implies a state, or level, of superiority in something.

But that, if you will think about it, is merely a value judgment of a person, a committee, or a group. That is, it is an intellectual, or emotional, consideration. As such, it can never be an operational term.

So we are not surprised when, each year in the U.S.A. these days, half a dozen publishers issue best-of-the-year science fiction. Worse, with a couple of well-advertised exceptions, none of the stories in one “Best” is the same as those of any of the others.

Authors have lived with such contradictions with equanimity since the early days of SF.

Not too long ago, one of the best-of-that-year editors asked an SF writer if he had a story that had not already been anthologized too often. Said author presently sent, along a story which he had selected because, until then, it had only been printed in a collection of his own stories. The editor accepted it as one of the best of the year without reading any of the other stories written by that author.

Now, it happened that the story which was submitted under these restricting requirements was the best short story ever written by that author. That year it won the Hugo award of the World Science Fiction Convention. None of the other “Best” editors had had the foresight to include it in their anthologies,

I have a lesser example from my own experience. Years ago, the editor of a magazine asked me to select one of my stories for what was called an author’s choice of his own best story. The editor, however, required that I limit my selection to a story printed in his magazine. The problem was he had only published three of my stories.

Like most SF authors I handled this situation with the total aplomb of someone who realizes that failure to make such a choice simply means your story is not included. P.S. I got the check.

Still—I should report--no one likes to be cynical.

Truth is, I have always had my own favorites among my stories, and occasionally re-read these.

Before I tell you my own choice, let me list for you those stories of mine which have repeatedly won the accolade of my particular readership.

Short stories: (early titles) “Far Centaurus”, “Enchanted Village”, “The Monster”. This last has sometimes been titled “Resurrection”, (more recent title) “Itself”.

Novelettes: (early titles) “Black Destroyer”, “Cooperate--Or Else”, “The Weapon Shop”, (recent titles) “The Proxy Intelligence”, “The Silkie”--novelette version--and “The Reflected Men”.

Novels: (early) *Slan*, *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* and *The World of Null-A*, (recent) *Quest for the Future* and *The Darkness on Diamondia*.

Now, why are those not my choices also? Well, I like far-out science fiction.

Does far-out--you may wonder--mean unscientific? Does it mean that I have a fantasy orientation as distinct from scientific extrapolation. Does it mean that I like it when an author creates bizarre but impossible situations.

No--to all three questions.

Take “The Storm”--which I include in my list. Surely, at first look, some of the ideas in it are as far-fetched as you could ask for. A “storm” in space. A planet revolving around the most fantastic sun in the known universe: S-Doradus.

I’ll concentrate on that last item. When I got the idea, I wrote John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding*, and asked him if it was possible to obtain any valid concept of such a planet. What would the sky look like? The plant life? etc. He wrote an astronomer friend. Among the three of us we evolved the planet as described in the story. So far as I know it’s the only description in existence. And it’s accurate.

There *is* an error in the original magazine version--and I have decided to let it stand in this present volume. Just to show you how difficult these matters are, let me describe the mistake. The astronomy texts I had available did not clearly identify which of the Magellanic Clouds contain S-Doradus. This particular point did not cross my mind during the correspondence. Suddenly, it was too late. I had to guess. Now, in those days I gave a lot of attention to the sounds of words. It was my belief that certain letters all by themselves conveyed a feeling. And so, when I wanted this feeling, or that, I would look for words with those sounds in them, and substitute them for words that might, otherwise, appear to be more suitable.

My critics presently took me apart on my use of the English language, particularly ridiculing such passages. So I abandoned the technique. However, before I was demol-ished, I decided that the word Lesser had a better feeling for my purposes than Greater. So, on this basis, I placed the great and glorious S-Doradus in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.

A few years later, while I was looking up something else in another text, there was the truth. Meaning, it was in the Greater Magellanic Cloud.

Those things happen to SF authors, alas.

Another example: I read an entire text book on the production and manufacture of steel and its by-products. I used the terminology in a little short story, titled, "Jugger-naut". To my dismay, a reader wrote in with a puzzled appraisal, stating that I seemed to know something about the subject; but that, as a steel man himself, he had to report that he had never heard any of the terms.

It developed that I had read a book about British steel production.

A third story needing comment is "The Ghost". It appeared originally in *Unknown Worlds*, a fantasy magazine. Well, it's science fiction. The idea in it derives from the time theories of a British philosopher, named Dunne. He called his time concept *serial time*.

When I was age eighteen--and a would-be writer--I loved the lush style of A. Merritt, the cosmic stories of E. E. Smith, and the western yarns of Max Brand. By the time I got around to eighteen a second time (age thirty-six, for you people who can't add) I was myself a science fiction writer, and had in fact written most of the stories which were subsequently regarded as my "Best". I spent my third eighteen years making a study of human behavior. During this time, I wrote a non-fiction book, *The Hypnotism Hand-book* for a psychologist. In 1962, *The Violent Man*, my Red China novel (not science fiction) was published by Parrar, Straus and Giroux. Another study begun in the fifties recently culminated in a second non-fiction title, *The Money Personality*. A third study--on women--will have an SF novel based on it (*The Secret Galactics*) to be published by Prentice-Hall, Inc. in March 1974.

In 1964 I again started to write science fiction. The first of my new stories was "The Expendables".

I am bemused by the possibility that what I wrote with a hammer and a chisel (so to speak) in my younger days, adhering rigidly to an 800-word-scene-method writing, is actually better than what I can now do when I am so much more knowledgeable. For example, today I feel that I understand human behavior, money, women, men (though not children), exercise, dreams, and writing technique as never before. Then, I just let character happen according to the needs of the story. Now, I know at all times what I'm doing, and why. It feels better. And I really think it's going to turn out better.

Here, without further preliminary discussion, is my list of my favorites: shorter stories: (early) "The Monater", "War of Nerves", (later) "The Ultra Man"; novelettes: (early) "Vault of the Beast", "The Storm", "Hand of the Gods", (later) "Silkies in Space", "The Proxy Intelligence"; novels: (early) *The World of Null-A*, (later) *The Silkie*, *The Battle of Forever*.

Those are my very top choices. Following close behind these are: "Dear Pen Pal", "The Cataaaaa", and "Juggernaut" (short); "Expendables", "The Ghost", "The Weapon Shop", "Secret Unattainable", and "The Green Forest" (novelettes); and the novels, *The Weapon Shops of Isher*, *The Wizard of Linn* and *Future Glitter*.

I want to make a brief comment about a couple of those choices. "Proxy Intelligence" is a sequel to an early novella, "Asylum", which at one time I considered one of my best stories. I still do; but I prefer "Proxy". (At some future time there will be another sequel, titled "I.Q. 10,000"--at the moment I don't quite feel up to doing that.)

It is very likely that, of my Linn stories, "Hand of the Gods" is the most perfectly organized. These first Linn stories were to some extent unconsciously modeled on Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*--so I had pointed out to me later. But I had done such a vast amount of reading in that particular Roman period that I really thought it was Roman history. However, the Linn family tree was modeled on the Medici line of Florence. So Clane is a combination of Claudius and Lorenzo. Transferred to 12,000 A.D., the whole thing acquired a life of its own, and even won a grudging accolade from my principal U.S. critic Damon Knight.

The stories printed in this present volume, and the novels I have named, qualify for my personal accolade because they are farther out than the stories not included in my list.

I recommend them to all my far-out reader types.

**A. E. van Vogt,**  
Hollywood, Calif., 1973

## DEAR PEN PAL

Planet Aurigae II

DEAR Pen Pal:

When I first received your letter from the interstellar correspondence club, my impulse was to ignore it. The mood of one who has spent the last seventy planetary periods--years I suppose you would call them--in an Aurigaen prison, does not make for a pleasant exchange of letters. However, life is very boring, and so I finally settled myself to the task of writing you.

Your description of Earth sounds exciting. I would like to live there for a while, and I have a suggestion in this connection, but I won't mention it till I have developed it further.

You will have noticed the material on which this letter is written. It is a highly sensitive metal, very thin, very flexible, and I have enclosed several sheets of it for your use. Tungsten dipped in any strong acid makes an excellent mark on it. It is important to me that you do write on it, as my fingers are too hot--literally--to hold your paper without damaging it.

I'll say no more just now. It is possible you will not care to correspond with a convicted criminal, and therefore I shall leave the next move up to you. Thank you for your letter. Though you did not know its destination, it brought a moment of cheer into my drab life.

Skander

Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

Your prompt reply to my letter made me happy. I am sorry your doctor thought it excited you too much, and sorry, also, if I have described my predicament in such a way as to make you feel badly. I welcome your many questions, and I shall try to answer them all.

You say the international correspondence club has no record of having sent any letters to Aurigae. That, according to them, the temperature on the second planet of the Aurigae sun is more than 500 degrees Fahrenheit. And that life is not known to exist there. Your club is right about the temperature and the letters. We have what your people would call a hot climate, but then we are not a hydrocarbon form of life, and find 500 degrees very pleasant.

I must apologize for deceiving you about the way your first letter was sent to me. I didn't want to frighten you away by telling you too much at once. After all, I could not be expected to know that you would be enthusiastic to hear from me.

The truth is that I am a scientist, and, along with the other members of my race, I have known for some centuries that there were other inhabited systems in the galaxy. Since I am allowed to experiment in my

spare hours, I amused myself in attempts at communication. I developed several simple systems for breaking in on galactic communication operations, but it was not until I developed a subspacewave control that I was able to draw your letter (along with several others, which I did not answer) into a cold chamber.

I use the cold chamber as both sending and receiving center, and since you were kind enough to use the material which I sent you, it was easy for me to locate your second letter among the mass of mail that accumulated at the nearest headquarters of the interstellar correspondence club.

How did I learn your language? After all, it is a simple one, particularly the written language seems easy. I had no difficulty with it. If you are still interested in writing me, I shall be happy to continue the correspondence.

Skander

Dear Pen Pal:

Your enthusiasm is refreshing. You say that I failed to answer your question about how I expected to visit Earth. I confess I deliberately ignored the question, as my experiment had not yet proceeded far enough. I want you to bear with me a short time longer, and then I will be able to give you the details. You are right in saying that it would be difficult for a being who lives at a temperature of 500 degrees Fahrenheit to mingle freely with the people of Earth. This was never my intention, so please relieve your mind. However, let us drop that subject for the time being.

I appreciate the delicate way in which you approach the subject of my imprisonment. But it is quite unnecessary. I performed forbidden experiments upon my body in a way that was deemed to be dangerous to the public welfare. For instance, among other things, I once lowered my surface temperature to 150 degrees Fahrenheit, and so shortened the radioactive cycle-time of my surroundings. This caused an unexpected break in the normal person to person energy flow in the city where I lived, and so charges were laid against me. I have thirty more years to serve. It would be pleasant to leave my body behind and tour the universe--but as I said I'll discuss that later.

I wouldn't say that we're a superior race. We have certain qualities which apparently "your people do not have. We live longer, not because of any discoveries we've made about ourselves, but because our bodies are built of a more enduring element--I don't know your name for it, but the atomic weight is 52.9 #. Our scientific discoveries are of the kind that would normally be made by a race with our kind of physical structure. The fact that we can work with temperatures of as high as--I don't know just how to put that--has been very helpful in the development of the sub-space energies which are extremely hot, and require delicate adjustments. In the later stages these adjustments can be made by machinery, but in the development the work must be done by "hand"--I put that word in quotes, because we have no hands in the same way that you have.

I am enclosing a photographic plate, properly cooled and chemicalized for your climate. I wonder if you would set it up and take a picture of yourself. All you have to do is arrange it properly on the basis of the laws of light--that is, light travels in straight lines, so stand in front of it--and when you are ready *think* "Ready!" The picture will be automatically taken.

Would you do this for me? If you are interested, I will also send you a picture of myself, though I must warn you. My appearance will probably shock you.

Sincerely,  
Skander

Planet Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

Just a brief note in answer to your question. It is not necessary to put the plate into a camera. You describe this as a dark box. The plate will take the picture when you think, "Ready!" I assure you it will be flooded with light.

Skander



Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

You say that while you were waiting for the answer to my last letter you showed the photographic plate to one of the doctors at the hospital--I cannot picture what you mean by doctor or hospital, but let that pass--and he took the problem up with government authorities. Problem? I don't understand. I thought we were having a pleasant correspondence, private and personal.

I shall certainly appreciate your sending that picture of yourself.

Skander

Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

I assure you I am not annoyed at your action. It merely puzzled me, and I am sorry the plate has not been returned to you. Knowing what governments are, I can imagine that it will not be returned to you for some time, so I am taking the liberty of inclosing another plate.

I cannot imagine why you should have been warned against continuing this correspondence. What do they expect me to do?--eat you up at long distance? I'm sorry but I don't like hydrogen in my diet.

In any event, I would like your picture as a memento of our friendship, and I will send mine as soon as I have re-ceived yours. You may keep it or throw it away, or give it to your governmental authorities--but at least I will have the knowledge that I've given a fair exchange.

With all best wishes

Skander

Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

Your last letter was so slow in coming that I thought you had decided to break off the correspondence. I was sorry to notice that you failed to enclose the photograph, puzzled by your reference to having a relapse, and cheered by your statement that you would send it along as soon as you felt better--whatever that means. However, the important thing is that you did write, and I respect the philosophy of your club which asks its members not to write of pessimistic matters. We all have our own problems which we regard as overshadowing the problems of others. Here I am in prison, doomed to spend the next 30 years tucked away from the main stream of life. Even the thought is hard on my restless spirit, though I know I have a long life ahead of me after my release.

In spite of your friendly letter, I won't feel that you have completely re-established contact with me until you send the photograph.

Yours in expectation

Skander

Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

The photograph arrived. As you suggest, your appearance startled me. From your description I thought I had mentally reconstructed your body. It just goes to show that words cannot really describe an object which has never been seen.

You'll notice that I've enclosed a photograph of myself, as I promised I would. Chunky, metallic looking chap, am I not, very different, I'll wager, than you expected? The various races with whom we have communicated become wary of us when they discover we are highly radioactive, and that literally we are a radioactive form of life, the only such (that we know of) in the universe. It's been very trying to be so isolated and, as you know, I have occasionally mentioned that I had hopes of escaping not only the deadly imprisonment to which I am being subjected but also the body which cannot escape.

Perhaps you'll be interested in hearing how far this idea has developed. The problem involved is one of exchange of personalities with someone else. Actually, it is not really an exchange in the accepted meaning of the word. It is necessary to get an impress of both individuals, of their mind and of their

thoughts as well as their bodies. Since this phase is purely mechanical, it is simply a matter of taking complete photographs and of exchanging them. By complete I mean of course every vibration must be registered. The next step is to make sure the two photographs are exchanged, that is, that each party has somewhere near him a complete photograph of the other. (It is already too late, Pen Pal. I have set in motion the sub-space energy interflow between the two plates, so you might as well read on.) As I have said it is not exactly an exchange of personalities. The original personality in each individual is suppressed, literally pushed back out of the consciousness, and the image personality from the “photographic” plate replaces it.

You will take with you a complete memory of your life on Earth, and I will take along memory of my life on Aurigae. Simultaneously, the memory of the receiving body will be blurrily at our disposal. A part of us will always be pushing up, striving to regain consciousness, but always lacking the strength to succeed.

As soon as I grow tired of Earth, I will exchange bodies in the same way with a member of some other race. Thirty years hence, I will be happy to reclaim my body, and you can then have whatever body I last happened to occupy.

This should be a very happy arrangement for us both. You, with your short life expectancy, will have out-lived all your contemporaries and will have had an interesting experience. I admit I expect to have the better of the ex-change--but now, enough of explanation. By the time you reach this part of the letter it will be me reading it, not you. But if any part of you is still aware, so long for now, Pen Pal. It's been nice having all those letters from you. I shall write you from time to time to let you know how things are going with my tour.

Skander

Aurigae II

Dear Pen Pal:

Thanks a lot for forcing the issue. For a long time I hesitated about letting you play such a trick on yourself. You see, the government scientists analyzed the nature of that first photographic plate you sent me, and so the final decision was really up to me. I decided that anyone as eager as you were to put one over should be allowed to succeed.

Now I know I didn't have to feel sorry for you. Your plan to conquer Earth wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but the fact that you had the idea ends the need for sympathy. By this time you will have realized for yourself that a man who has been paralyzed since birth, and is subject to heart attacks, cannot expect a long life span. I am happy to tell you that your once lonely pen pal is enjoying himself, and I am happy to sign myself with a name to which I expect to become accustomed.

With best wishes

Skander

## THE GREEN FOREST

“HERE!” said Marenson.

He put the point of his pencil down in the center of a splotch of green. His eyes focused on the wiry man opposite him.

“Right here, Mr. Clugy,” he said, “is where the camp will be built.”

Clugy leaned forward and glanced at the spot. Then he looked up; and Marenson was aware of the spaceman's slate-gray eyes studying him. Clugy drew slowly back into his chair, and said in a monotone:

“Why that particular spot?”

“Oh,” said Marenson, “I have a feeling we'll get more juice from there.”

"A *feeling!*" The words came explosively. Clugy swallowed hard, and said quietly: "Mr. Marenson, that's dangerous jungle country." He stood up, and bent over the map of the Mira sun planet. "Now, here," he said briskly, "in this mountain country it's bad enough, but the animal and plant life can be fought off, and the climate is bearable."

Marenson shook his head, and put his pencil back to the green splotch. "Here," he said with finality.

Clugy went back to his chair and sat down. He was a lean man with the tan of many suns on his face. Marenson was aware of the spaceman's hard eyes studying him. The other seemed to be tensing himself for a violent verbal battle. Abruptly, he must have decided against a head-on clash with his superior.

"But why?" he said in a perplexed tone. "After all, the problem is very simple. A big ship is being built, and we need the organic juice from the progeny of these Mira beasts."

"Exactly," said Marenson, "so we locate our camp in the forest which is their main habitat."

"Why not," Clugy persisted, "leave the job of selecting the camp site to the field men--the hunters?"

Marenson put his pencil down deliberately. He was accustomed to dealing with people who opposed his plans. He thought of himself as a calm man whose patience was exhausted.

There were times when he gave detailed reasons for his actions, and there were times when he didn't. This was one of the times when he didn't; under the rulings, actually, he couldn't. A glance at the wall clock showed that it was ten to four. Tomorrow at this hour he would be clearing his desk preliminary to leaving on a month's vacation with Janet. Between now and then he had a score of vital things to do. It was time to break off the interview. He said in a formal voice:

"I take full responsibility for my decision. And now, Mr. Clugy--"

He stopped, conscious that he had said the wrong thing. It was not often that there were scenes in this sumptuous office with its hundred-story view of the capital of the galaxy. Usually the deep space men who came in here were properly impressed by Ancil Marenson and his resonant baritone voice. But he took one look now at Clugy's face, and realized he had handled the other in a wrong fashion.

Clugy hunched himself forward angrily. And it was the stupendousness of the emotional jump he made then that startled Marenson--from mildness, without any gradations, to unqualified anger.

"Easy talk," he said now in a harsh, steely voice, "from a man in the penguin division of the service."

Marenson blinked. He parted his lips to speak, then closed them tight. He started to smile, but changed his mind. He had such a long space career behind him that he had never thought of himself as being in the armchair brigade. He cleared his throat.

"Mr. Clugy," he said mildly, "I'm surprised that you introduce personalities into this purely governmental affair."

Clugy's stare was unflinching. "Mr. Marenson," he said with chilling politeness, "a man who sends others into dangerous situations on a mere whim has already introduced the personal element. You're making a life-and-death decision involving several thousand brave men. What you don't seem to understand is that the Mira planet forest is a green hell. There's nothing else like it in the universe we know--unless the Yevd have something similar in their section of the galaxy. The year round it swarms with the progeny of the lymph beast. What puzzles me is why don't I get up and punch you one right in that handsome face of yours?"

It was the reference to the Yevd that gave Marenson the opening he'd been looking for. "If you don't mind," he said coldly, "I'm going to have you tested for light illusion. I'm having endless trouble on all our supply lines from Yevd interference. There's something funny about a man who's fighting as hard as you are to prevent lymph juice from being delivered to the navy."

Clugy smiled, showing his teeth. "That's right," he said. "Attack is the best defense, isn't it? So now I'm a Yevd using my mastery of light and illusion to make you believe I'm a human being."

He stood up. Before he could continue, Marenson said in a savage voice: "It's a good thing that there are men like me in the background. Field people have a tendency to slack on the job, and take all the easy ways. My job is to deliver lymph juice to The Yards. Deliver it, understand. No excuses. No explaining that the hunters find it more convenient to commute from the mountains. I have to get the juice to the factories, or resign in favor of someone who can. Mr. Clugy, I make a hundred thousand a year

because I know what decisions to make.”

Clugy said: “We’ll get the juice.”

“You haven’t been.”

“We’re just starting.” He leaned over the desk. His gray eyes were steely. “My penguin friend,” he said softly, “you’ve got yourself into a little neurotic corner, fancying the hard decision is always the right one. Well, I don’t give a care about your job conditioning. I’m telling you this: When the order comes to me, it had better read, ‘Mountain camp’, or you’ll know the reason why.”

“Then I’ll know the reason why.”

“Is that final?”

“That’s final.”

Without a word, Clugy turned and headed for the door. It closed behind him with a crash.

Marenson hesitated, then called his wife. She came on the visiplat in her jaunty fashion, a slim, healthy young woman of thirty-five. She smiled when she saw who it was. Marenson explained what had happened, finished:

“So you see I’ve got to stay down here and figure out ways and means to prevent him from getting back at me. I’ll be late, I expect.”

“All right. “Bye.”

Marenson worked fast. In the early, friendly part of his conversation with Clugy he had mentioned his vacation. Now, he called Government Messenger Service, and sent the spaceship tickets for the trip to the Paradise Planet offices for validation. While he waited for the messenger to return, he checked on Clugy.

The man was registered with his son in a suite at the Space-men’s Club. Son? Marenson’s eyes narrowed. If Clugy got rough, the boy might be the best method of striking back at him.

During the next hour, he discovered that Clugy had important “connections” in high government circles, that he had killed four men, *juris ultima thule*--beyond the law of the uttermost limit--and that he was known as a man who liked to do a job his own way.

The tickets were returned as he reached that point. He grinned down at the union stamp of “validation” on them. If the spacemen’s organization repudiated that, they would be open to a court suit for triple damages.

Round one, accordingly, was his.

His grin faded. It was a minor victory against a man who had killed four times.

“The important thing,” Marenson decided, “is to stay out of trouble until Janet and I are aboard the Paradise liner tomorrow. That will give me a month.”

He realized he was perspiring. He shook his head sadly. “I’m not the man I used to be.” He looked down at his long, strong body. “I’m getting soft. I couldn’t take a really bad beating up, even with hypnotic anesthesia.” He felt better for the admission. “Now, I’m getting down to realities.”

The phone rang, Marenson jumped, then answered it. The man whose face came on the video said: “Mr. Clugy is just leaving the Spacemen’s Club. He was in his room for about fifteen minutes.”

“Do you know where he’s going?”

“He is now entering a taxigyro. There goes his destination up on the meter. Just a moment, I can hardly see it ... Y--A ... I got it. The Yards.”

Marenson nodded gloomily. Clugy returning to The Yards could, of course, mean many things. They were long and had many points of interest.

“Shall we beat him up, sir?”

Marenson hesitated. Ten years ago he would have said yes. Beat your opponent to the punch. That was the first principle of war between two spacemen. But he wasn’t a spaceman any more. He couldn’t define it, but it had some-thing to do with prestige. If he was hurt, it was news. In that sense Clugy had an advantage over him. Because if he was caught doing anything against the man, the powerful space-men’s union would ruin him. Whereas if Clugy took action against him, his union would probably defend him on the grounds that he was acting for the best interests of his men.

Marensen's hesitation ended. "Follow him," he ordered, "and report to me."

He recognized the action of a half measure. But, then, a man couldn't risk his career on the basis of one incident. He closed his desk, and headed for home.

He found Janet still packing. She listened to his account of what he had done, a faraway expression in her eyes, and finally said: "You surely don't expect to win that way."

There was a tone in her voice that stung. Marensen de-fended himself, finishing: "So you see, I just can't take the risks I used to take."

"It's not a matter of risks," she said. "It's a matter of thoroughness." She frowned. "My father used to say that no man today could afford to let down his standards."

Marensen was silent. Her father had been a fleet admiral in his day, and she regarded him as a final authority in most matters. On this occasion he was half inclined to agree with her, and yet there was another factor.

"The important thing," he said, "is that we get away to-morrow evening on the Paradise liner. If I do anything directly against Clugy, I might have an injunction slapped on me, or a union official may order me to appear before an investigating committee--the whole setup is dangerous."

"Is that really the best way to get lymph juice--the way you ordered it?"

Marensen nodded vigorously. "Yes, it is. The records go back just over three hundred years. There have been five major periods of big ship building during that time. And on each occasion the men who actually had to do the hunting have kicked up a row. Every method was tried, and the statistics show the method of living in the forest to be a full seventy-five per cent more effective than any other system."

"Did you tell that to Clugy?"

"No." Marensen shook his head grimly.

"Why not?"

"Two generations ago, a union lawyer got a smart decision rendered against the government. The Supreme Court ruled that new techniques of hunting *could* nullify all past ex-perience. No basically new methods of hunting had or have been developed, you understand. But, having made that statement, they then went on to draw their conclusion as if the new methods actually existed. They held that, since new techniques could nullify past experience, therefore to mention the past was to engage in unfair tactics. The govern-ment, they said, meaning the navy, was the stronger party in the dispute, and there was always danger accordingly that the interests of the men would be ignored. Therefore, the past cannot be considered. Therefore, mention of the past must be regarded as an unfair tactic. Such a tactic would automatically mean that the navy would lose the dispute."

Marensen smiled. "Clugy was probably waiting to pounce on me if I used that argument. Of course I may be doing him an injustice. He may not know about the ruling."

"Are these lymph beasts really dangerous?"

He said solemnly: "The progeny are in their own special fashion probably the deadliest creatures ever developed by Nature."

"What are they like?"

Marensen told her. When he had finished, Janet frowned and said: "But why are they so important? Why do we need them?"

Marensen grinned at her. "If I told you that," he said, "the next time I was tested for loyalty I would not only auto-matically lose my job but at the very least I would be imprisoned for the rest of my life. I might be executed for treason. No, thank you, Mrs. Marensen." There was silence for a while; and Marensen discovered that his words had chilled him just a little. He had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was so easy, working in an office, to concentrate on the details of a job, and forget the deadlier reasons for that job.

More than two hundred years before, the Yevd had come from the region of the dark obscuring matter in the center of the galaxy. Their ability to control light with the cells of their bodies was not suspected until one day a "man" was blasted while rifling the safe of the Research Council. As the human image dissolved into a rectangular cubelike shape with numerous reticulated legs and arms, human beings had

their first inkling of the fantastic danger that threatened.

The fleet was mobilized, armed helicarcs flew along every street, using radar to silhouette the true shapes of the Yevd. It was afterwards discovered that by a more difficult control of energy, the Yevd could guard themselves against radar. But apparently in their contempt of man's defense systems, they had not bothered to do so. On Earth and on other systems inhabited by men, altogether thirty-seven million of the enemy were killed.

Thereafter, human and Yevd ships fought each other on sight. The intensity of the war waxed and waned, but a few years before, the Yevd had occupied a planetary system near to the solar system. When they refused to leave, the United Governments started the construction of the biggest ship ever planned. Already, though it was only half finished, the great machine towered into the lower heavens.

The Yevd were a carbon-hydrogen-oxygen-fluorine life form, tough of skin and muscle, and almost immune to chemicals and bacteria that affected men. The great com-pelling problem for man had been to find an organism in his own part of the galaxy that would enable him to experiment for bacteriological warfare.

The progeny of the lymph beast was that organism. *And more!* The lymph juice, when chemically separated, yielded a high percentage of heavy water.

It was believed that if the Yevd ever discovered how tremendously man was depending on the lymph beasts, they would launch a suicidal attack on the entire Mira system. There were other sources of heavy water, but no other fluorine-metabolism creature that could be used against the Yevd had yet been discovered.

The heavy water was the surface secret. It was hoped that *that* was what the Yevd would uncover if they ever began to study the problem.

Janet broke the silence with a sigh. "Life has certainly become complicated." She made no further comment. As soon as dinner was over, she retired to her bedroom to finish her packing. When Marenson glanced in later, her light was out and she was in bed. He closed the door softly.

At ten o'clock there was still no call from Detective Jerred. Marenson went to bed, and he must have slept, because he woke with a start to the sound of his visiphone buzzing. A glance at the night clock showed that it was a few minutes after midnight, and a glance at the plate, when he had turned it on, that it was the detective calling him at last.

"I'm back at the club," said Jerred. "Here's what's been happening."

On his arrival at The Yards, Clugy had gone directly to union headquarters, and a union court sat immediately on his appeal for a reversal of the decision. His petition was refused within three hours, on the grounds that the problem involved was supervisory, and did not concern the union.

Apparently, Clugy accepted the decision. For he did not request a full dress trial, which would have required the presence of Marenson as a witness. Instead, he returned to his club where he and his son had dinner in their room. Clugy went to a show by himself, and returned about half an hour ago. He was scheduled to have breakfast at the club, and then at eleven board the freighter that would drop him off at Mira 92, a few days later.

Jerred ended: "Looks as if he made the appeal to satisfy any protests the men might make, then let it go."

Marenson could see how that might be. He had run up against opposition before, and for the most part it was a simple matter of legal procedure. This seemed now to be in the same category.

Clugy would have to act fast if he hoped to change the camp order before his ship departed for Mira.

Marenson said: "Keep somebody watching him till he leaves."

He slept well, and he must have relaxed his vigilance. As he headed for his gyro on the roof after breakfast, he was only vaguely aware of the two men who came toward him.

"Mr. Marenson?" one asked.

Marenson looked up. They were well-dressed, young, strong looking. "Why, yes," he said, "What--"

A gas gun exploded in his face.

Marensen woke up mad. He could feel that fury tensing his body as he came slowly up out of the darkness. And just as he was about to become fully conscious, he recognized the anger for what it was. The anger of fear.

He stayed where he was, eyes closed, body very still, forcing his breath into the slow, deep pattern of a sleeper. He was lying on something that felt like a canvas cot. It sagged in the middle, but it was reasonably comfortable.

A faint breeze blew against his cheek, and it brought a thick rancid odor to his nostrils. Jungle, he thought. Rotting vegetation intermingled with the tangy scent of innumerable growing things. The mustiness of the damp earth and some-thing else--an acridness in the air itself, an alien atmosphere that registered on human nostrils with an almost sulphurous sharpness.

He was in a jungle on a planet that was not Earth.

He remembered the two young men who had come out of the stairway entrance as he walked toward his gyro. Marensen groaned inwardly. *Gassed, by heaven*, he thought. *Caught by a simple trick like that. But why? Was it personal--or Yved?*

Involuntarily, at that final possibility, Marensen cringed. The anger faded out of him completely, and only a cold fear remained. He lay then for a while simulating deep sleep. But slowly his spirit revived, and his mind began to work again. His thoughts became analytical. He remembered Clugy, but realized he couldn't be sure. As head of the procurement division for the Ship, he had in his time offended many bold and dangerous individuals.

That was one aspect, one possibility.

The other one was that the Yevd enemy of man was using him in one of their intricate games to slow down the construction of the Ship. If the Yevd were responsible, it would be complicated. The masters of light had devious minds, and took it for granted that any simple scheme would be quickly suspected.

Marensen began to breathe more easily. He was still alive, his hands were not tied; and the biggest question was: What would happen when he opened his eyes?

He opened them.

He was staring up through dense foliage at a reddish glowing sky. The sky looked hot, and that gave him a sudden awareness that he was perspiring furiously. And, oddly, now that he knew about it, the heat almost smothered him. He shrank from the flamelike intensity, then slowly climbed to his feet.

It was as if he had given a signal. From his right, beyond a line of bushes, he heard the sounds of a large camp suddenly coming to life.

For the first time, Marensen noticed that he was dressed in a light mesh unit that incased him from head to foot. The material was transparent, and even covered his boots. The clothing shocked him. For it was the kind of hunting outfit used on primitive planets that swarmed with hostile life of every description.

Which planet, and why? He began to think now with more conviction that his predicament was Clugy's doing, and that this was the famous Mira world where the lymph beast lived.

He started off in the direction of the sounds.

The line of brush that had barred his view was, he discovered, about twenty feet thick, and the moment he was through it, he saw that it was not on the outskirts of the camp, but near the center. And now he noticed that the reddish sky was something of an illusion. It was part of a barrier that had been electronically raised around the camp. An energy screen. The red effect was merely the screen's method of reacting to the light of the particular sun that was shining down upon it.

Marensen began to breathe easier. All around were men and machines--men by the hundreds. Even the most cunning group of Yevd wouldn't try to create so massive an illusion. And, besides, their great skill in the use of light was personal to each individual, and not a mass phenomenon.

A clearing was being created out of a tangle of growth. There was so much movement it was hard to know what any individual was doing. Marensen's eye for such things was ten years out of practice, but in a few moments he had oriented himself. The plastic huts were going up to his left. Those at the right were merely waiting their turn to be moved into place. Clugy's office would be in the permanent part of the encampment.

Grimly, Marensen started towards the hut village. Twice “digger” machines harrumphed past him, sowing their insect poison, and he had to step gingerly over the loose earth; in its early stages the poison was as unfriendly to human beings as to anything else. The upturned soil glittered with long, black, shiny worms writhing feebly, with the famous red Mira bugs that shocked their victims with electric currents, and with other *things* that he did not recognize. He reached the huts, walked on, and came presently to a sign which read:

## PRODUCTION SUPERINTENDENT

Ira Clugy

A youth of fifteen or sixteen lolled in an easy-chair behind the counter inside. He looked up with the lazy, insolent eyes of a clerk whose boss is absent. Then he turned his back.

Marensen went through the gate, and reached for the scruff of the kid’s neck. There must have been a preliminary warning, for the neck twisted away, and like a cat the boy was on his feet. He came around with a snarl on his face.

Baffled and furious, Marensen retreated into words. “Where’s Clugy?”

“I’ll have you broken for this!” the boy snapped. “My father--”

Marensen cut him off. “Look, Mr. Big Shot, I’m Marensen from Administration. I’m not the kind that’s broken. I break. You’d better start talking, and fast. Is Clugy your father?”

The boy stood stiff, then nodded.

“Where is he?”

“Out in the jungle.”

“How long will he be gone?”

The boy hesitated. “Probably be in for lunch--sir.”

“I see.” Marensen pondered the information. He was surprised that Clugy had chosen to absent himself, and so leave Ancil Marensen temporarily in full control of the camp. But from his own point of view that was all to the good. Even as he made his plans, his mind reached to another thought. He asked: “When’s the next ship due?”

“In twenty days.”

Marensen nodded. It seemed to him that he was beginning to understand. Clugy had known he was due to leave on his vacation, and so he had decided to inconvenience him. Instead of pleasure on Paradise Planet, he’d spend his vacation on primitive and dangerous Mira 92. Having no other method of countering his order, Clugy was repaying him with personal discomfort.

Marensen’s lips tightened. Then he said: “What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

“Well, Peter,” said Marensen grimly, “I’ve got some work for you to do. So let’s get busy.”

For a while, then, it was a case of “Where’s that, Peter?” And, “Peter, how about the stamp for this kind of docu-ment?” Altogether, in one hour he wrote out five orders. He assigned himself a Model A hut. He authorized himself to make visiradio calls to Earth. He assigned himself to Clugy’s food unit. And he requisitioned two blasters, the use of a helicar and a pilot to operate it.

While Peter raced around delivering four of the orders to the proper departments, Marensen wrote out a news item for the editor of the camp newspaper. When that also was delivered, and Peter was back, Marensen felt better. What could be done on the scene was done. And since he’d have to remain for twenty days, the men in the camp might as well believe he was here on an inspection tour. The news-paper account would see to that.

Frowning, but partially satisfied, he started for the radio hut. His requisition was not questioned. He sat down and waited while the long and involved connection was put through.

Outside, men and machines were forcing a malignant stretch of jungle to be temporarily friendly to the hothouse needs of human flesh. Inside, surrounded by embanked instrument boards, Marensen pondered



his next move. He had no evidence. His presence here against his will was not transparently the fault of Clugy. He had a lot of obscure back trails to investigate.

"Here's your connection," said the radio man at last. "Booth Three."

"Thank you."

Marensen talked first to his lawyer. "I want a court order," he said after he had described his situation, "authorizing the camp magistrate to question Clugy by means of a lie detector, and authorizing complete amnesia afterwards. That's for my protection during the rest of the time I'll have to spend in the camp with him. Can do?"

"Can," said the lawyer, "by tomorrow."

Next, Marensen connected with Jerred, head of his protective staff. The detective's face lighted as he saw who it was. "Man," he demanded, "where have you been?"

He listened soberly to Marensen's account, then nodded. "The outrage has one favorable aspect," he said, "it puts us into a better legal position. Perhaps now we can find out who the woman was that called Clugy's room at eleven o'clock the night before you were kidnapped. Apparently, his son answered, and must have communicated the message to him.

"Woman?" said Marensen.

Jerred shrugged. "I don't know who it was. My agent didn't report to me till the following morning. He had no opportunity to listen in."

Marensen nodded, and said: "Try to see if there were any eyewitnesses to my kidnapping, then we'll get a court order and find out from Clugy and his son who the woman was."

"You can count on us to do everything possible," said the detective heartily.

"I expect results," said Marensen, and broke the connection.

His next call was to his apartment. The visiplat did not brighten, and after the proper length of time, a recorder sighed at him:

"Mr. and Mrs. Marensen have gone to Paradise Planet until August 26th. Do you wish to leave a message?"

Marensen hung up, shaken, and went quietly out of the hut.

The fear that had come faded before his determination not to be alarmed. There must be a rational explanation for Janet's departure. He couldn't quite see how the Yevd could be involved.

He was annoyed that his mind had leaped instantly to that possibility.

A minute later, wearily, he unlocked the door of the hut. Inside, he removed his boots and sprawled on the bed. But he was too restless to relax. After less than five minutes, he got up with the intention of going to Clugy's office, and waiting there for the man to return. He had a lot of hard things to say to Ira Clugy.

Outside, he stopped short. Climbing up to his hut, he hadn't realized what a vantage point he had. The hill reared up a hundred feet above the jungle and the main part of the camp. It gave him an unsurpassed view of a green splendor, of the endless, shining forest. Clugy had chosen his camp site well. Lacking the higher mountains hundreds of miles to the south, he had nevertheless found in the hilly jungle country a sizeable semimountain that sloped gradually up until it was about eight hundred feet above the main jungle. The hill where Marensen stood was the final peak of the long, jungle-robed slope.

Marensen saw the glint of rivers, the sparkling color of strange trees; and, as he looked, something of his old feeling for this universe of planets beyond Earth stirred within him. He glanced up at the famous and wonderful Mira sun, and the thrill that came ended only when he thought of his situation and his purpose. Grimly, he started down the hill.

Both Clugy and his son were in the office when Marensen entered it a few minutes later. The spaceman stood up. He seemed curious rather than friendly. "Peter was telling me about you being here," he said. "So you thought you'd come and look the territory over personally, eh?"

Marensen ignored the comment. Coldly, he made his accusation. He finished, "You may think you're going to get away with this trick, but I assure you that you aren't."

Clugy gazed at him in astonishment. "What's all this nonsense?" the spaceman demanded.

"Do you deny you had me kidnapped?"

“Why, certainly, I deny it.” Clugy was indignant. “I wouldn’t pull a fool stunt like that in these days of author-ized lie detector tests. Besides, I don’t work that way.”

He sounded so sincere that for a moment Marensen was taken aback. He recovered swiftly. “If you’re so positive,” he said, “how about coming down right now to the camp magistrate’s office, and taking an immediate test.”

Clugy frowned at him. He seemed puzzled. “I’ll do just that,” he said. He spoke quietly. “And you’d better be pre-pared to take such a test yourself. There’s something funny about this whole business.”

“Come along!” Marensen said.

Clugy paused at the door. “Peter, keep an eye on the office till I get back.”

“Sure, Pop.”

The man’s swift acceptance of the challenge was in itself convincing, Marensen thought as he walked along at Clugy’s side. It seemed to prove that he actually had accepted the ruling of his union. His part in this affair must have ended the very night of their argument.

But then, who had seized on the situation? Who was try-ing to take advantage of the quarrel? Yevd? There was no indication of it. But then who?

The two tests required slightly less than an hour and a half. And Clugy was telling the truth. And Marensen was telling the truth. Convinced, the two men gazed at each other in baffled amazement. It was Marensen who broke the silence.

“What about the woman who called up your son the night before you left Earth?”

“What woman?”

Marensen groaned. “You mean to tell me you don’t know anything about that either?” He broke off with a frown. “Just a minute,” he said, “how come Peter didn’t tell you?”

His mind leaped to a fantastic possibility. He said in a hushed voice: “I think we’d better surround your hut.”

But the superintendent’s office, when they finally closed in on it, was empty. Nor was Peter discoverable at any of his usual haunts.

“Obviously,” said Clugy, his face the color of lead, “when he heard me agree to a lie detector test, he realized the game was up.”

“We’ve got to trace this whole thing back,” Marensen said slowly. “Somewhere along the line a Yevd was substituted for your son. He came with you to Solar City, and took no chances on being caught by one of the several traps we have around The Yards to catch Yevd spies. I mean by that, he stayed in his room, and apparently communicated with other Yevd agents by visiradio. That woman who called the Yevd who was impersonating your son was probably another Yevd, and there’s still another one of them im-personating me--”

He stopped. Because that other one was with Janet. Marensen started hastily for the radio hut. I’ve got to contact Earth,” he called over his shoulder to Clugy.

The radio hut was a shambles. On the floor, with his head blown off, was a man--Marensen couldn’t be sure it was the operator. There was blood splattered on dozens of instruments, and the whole intricate machinery of an interstellar radio system had been burned by innumerable crisscrosses of energy from a powerful blaster.

Marensen did not linger in the radio hut. Back in Clugy’s office, he paused only long enough to find out from that distracted man that the nearest radio station was in a settlement some nine hundred miles to the south.

“It’s all right,” he said to Clugy’s offer of a requisition for a helicar and pilot. “I signed one myself this morning.”

A few minutes later he was in the air.

The speed of the machine gradually soothed Marensen. The tenseness went out of his muscles, and his mind began to work smoothly again. He stared out over the green world of the jungle, and thought: *The purpose of the Yevd is to slow down procurement of lymph juice. That’s the important thing to*

*remember.* They must have struck first at the source of the juice, and did an easy imitation of a boy. That was their usual tactic of interference at the production level. Then a new factor came into the situation. They discovered that Ancil Marensen, head of the procurement department, could be fitted into an enlarged version of their sabotage plan. Accordingly, two Yevd who looked like human beings gassed him and put him aboard the Mira freighter.

At the same time, a Yevd image of Marensen must have continued on to the office, and later that day the duplicate and Janet had probably departed together for Paradise Planet.

*But why did they let me live?* Marensen wondered. *Why not get me completely out of the way?*

There was only one reasonable explanation. They wanted to make further use of him. First of all, he must establish his presence, and his authority, and then--and not till then--he would be killed. And another Marensen image would order Clugy to transfer his camp to the distant mountain. In that fashion they would convince the willing Clugy that Marensen, having come to see for himself, had recognized the justice of Clugy's arguments.

Marensen felt himself change color--because that stage *had* arrived. All they needed from him was his signature on the order to Clugy. And even that could possibly be dispensed with, if they had managed to obtain some copy of his signature in the time available to them. But how would the attempt on him be made?

Uneasily, Marensen gazed out of the small helicar. He felt unprotected. He had been hasty in leaving the camp. In his anxiety to secure the safety of Janet he had exposed himself in a small ship which could be destroyed all too easily. *I'd better go back,* he decided.

He called to the pilot, "Turn back!"

"Back?" said the man. He sounded surprised.

Marensen waved and pointed. The man seemed to hesitate, and then--he turned the machine upside down. With a crash, Marensen was flung to the ceiling of the craft. As he scrambled and fought for balance, the machine was spun once again. This time he had hold of a crossbar, and he came down more easily. He struggled to pull out a blaster.

The helicar was plummeting down towards the jungle now, and the pilot was jerking it violently to and fro. Marensen guessed his purpose and his identity, and felt ill. What a fool he had been to rush so blindly into this trap. The Yevd, knowing that he would try to send a radio message, must have killed the regular pilot--and simply waited for that simpleton Ancil Marensen to do what it expected him to do.

Marensen had a glimpse of trees terribly near. And realized the enemy's plan. A crash landing. The weak human being would be knocked unconscious, or killed. The Yevd, a carbon-hydrogen-oxygen-fluorine life form, would survive.

The next moment, there was a thump that shook his bones. During the seconds that followed, he seemed to be continuously conscious. He was even aware that the branches of strong trees had broken the fall of the ship, and so possibly saved his life. More vaguely, he knew when his blasters were taken from him. The only period of blur occurred when he was dropped to the ground from the helicar.

When his vision cleared again, he was in time to see another helicar come down in a nearby open space among the trees. The image of young Peter Clugy stepped out of it, and joined the image of the pilot. The two Yevd stood looking down at him.

Marensen braced himself. He was as good as dead, but the will to meet death standing up and fighting made him try to climb to his feet. He couldn't. His hands were tied to his legs.

He lay back weakly. He had no memory of having been tied. Which meant that he was wrong in believing that he had not been unconscious. It didn't matter, of course. With sick eyes he gazed up at his captors.

"What happened to the real Peter Clugy?" he asked finally.

The two Yevd merely continued to look at him, bleakly. Not that an answer was needed. Somewhere along the line of their moves to this point, Clugy's son had been murdered. It was possible that these two individuals did not even know the details of the killing.

Marensen changed the subject, and said with a boldness he did not feel: "I see I made a slight personal

error. Well, I'll make a bargain with you. You release me, and I'll see to it that you get safely off the planet."

The two images wavered ever so slightly, an indication that the Yevd were talking to each other by means of light waves above the human vision level. Finally, one of them said:

"We're in no danger. We'll get off this planet in our own good time."

Marenson laughed curtly. The laugh sounded unconvincing in his own ears, but the fact that they had answered him at all was encouraging. He said savagely: "The whole game is up. When I called Earth, the merest suspicion that Yevd were involved set in motion a far-flung defense organization. And, actually, my call was not necessary. The discovery that Yevd were involved was made in connection with my wife, Janet."

It was a shot in the dark, but he was desperately anxious to find out if Janet were all right. Once more, there was the faint unsteadiness in the human images, that indicated conversation. Then the Yevd who was imitating Peter Clugy said:

"That's impossible. The person who accompanied your wife to Paradise Planet had instructions to destroy her if she showed the faintest sign of suspicion."

Marenson shrugged. "You'd better believe me," he said.

He was tingling. His own analysis had been confirmed. Janet had gone off on her vacation with someone she thought was her husband. It was a characteristic of Yevd imitating human beings that they liked to be with a real woman or man who would be able to do things for them. There were so many things that a Yevd could do only with great difficulty, so many places where it was dangerous for an individual Yevd to go. Thus the image of Peter Clugy had taken the risk of living with the real Peter's father, and the image of Ancil Marenson had gone along with the real Janet.

The pilot Yevd said: "We don't have to worry too much about any small group of human beings. Long-married couples are not demonstrative with each other. Days go by without kissing. In other words, the person imitating you is protected from discovery by contact for at least a week. Our plan will be accomplished by then."

Marenson said: "Don't be a couple of fools. I can see you're going to be stupid and make us all die. That's where this kind of stuff is so depressing. We three will die. And no one will care. It's not as if we'll be heroes, any of us. You'll be burned, trying to escape, and I--" He broke off. "What's your plan for me?"

"First," said young Clugy's image, "we want you to sign a paper."

He paused; and Marenson sighed. His analysis of the situation had been so completely right--too late.

"And if I don't?" he asked. His voice trembled the faintest bit.

"Your signature," was the reply, "would merely make things easier for us. In doing what we have done, we had to act swiftly, and so none of our people capable of imitating a signature is available on this planet. That can be rectified in a few days, but fortunately for you, we want quicker action. Accordingly, we are in a position to offer you the choice of signing or not signing."

"O.K.," said Marenson ironically. "My choice is--I don't sign."

"If you sign," the Yevd went on in an inexorable tone, "we'll kill you mercifully."

"And if I don't?"

"We leave you here."

Marenson blinked. For an instant it seemed a meaningless threat. And then:

"Yes," said Peter's image with satisfaction, "leave you here for the lymph beast's progeny. I understand they like to burrow into the flesh of anybody they catch--a very weight-reducing experience."

He laughed. It was a human laugh, a remarkable reproduction considering that it was done by light wave activation of a sound box it carried in its abdomen.

Marenson did not answer immediately. Until this instant, he had taken it for granted that the Yevd knew as much about the habits of those deadly dangerous creatures as did men. Apparently, their information was vague, accurate as far as it went, but--

"Of course," said Peter Clugy's image, "we won't really go away. We'll just go over to the ship and

watch. And when you've had enough, we'll get your signature. Does that meet with your approval?"

Marenson had caught a movement out of the corner of one eye. It seemed a little more than a series of shadows very close to the ground, more like a quiver in the soil than anything substantial. But the perspiration broke out on his forehead. *Dark forest of Mira*, he thought, *alive with the young of the lymph beast*--He held himself very still, looking neither to the right nor to the left, neither at the Yevd nor at the shadow things.

"Well"--it was the Yevd image of the pilot--"we'll stick around and have a look at some of these creatures we've been hearing so much about."

They were moving away as the speaker reached that point. But Marenson did not turn, did not look. He heard a jerky movement, and then bright flashes lit up the dark corridor under the trees. But Marenson did not even roll his eyes. He lay still as death, silent as a log. A thing slithered across his chest, paused while he grew half-paralyzed with fright and then moved on with a gliding movement.

The lights flashed more brilliantly now, and more erratically. And there were thumping sounds as if heavy bodies were frantically flinging themselves around. Marenson didn't have to look to realize that the enemy pair were in their death throes.

Two more Yevd were discovering the hard way that human beings were interested in the brainless lymph things because they *were* as dangerous to man's cunning opponent as to man himself.

For Marenson, the effort to remain quiet was a special agony, but he held himself there until the light was as spasmodic as a guttering candle, and as dim. When the glow had completely died, and when there had been silence for more than a minute, Marenson permitted himself the exquisite luxury of turning his head slightly.

Only one of the Yevd was in his line of vision. It lay on the ground, a long, almost black, rectangular shape, with a whole series of reticulated arms and legs. Except for the appendages, it looked more like a contorted bar of metal than a thing of flesh. Here and there over its surface, the body glittered with a black, glassy sheen, evidence that some of the light-controlling cells were still alive.

In that one look, Marenson saw no less than seven discolored gashes in the part of the Yevd body that he could see--which meant that at least seven of the young lymph beasts had crawled inside. Being mindless, they would be quite unaware that they had killed anything or that there had been a struggle.

They lived to eat, and they attacked any object that moved. If it ceased moving before they reached it, they forgot about it instantly. Utterly indiscriminate, they attacked leaves drifting in the wind, the waving branch of a tree, even moving water. Millions of the tiny snake-like things died every month making insensate attacks on inanimate objects that had moved for one reason or another. Only a very small percentage survived the first two months of their existence, and changed into their final form.

In the development of the lymph beast, Nature had achieved one of her most fantastic balancing acts. The ultimate shape of the lymph beast was a hard-shelled beehivelike construction *that could not move*.

It was difficult to go far into the Mira jungle without stumbling across one of these structures. They were everywhere, on the ground and in trees, on hillsides and in valleys--wherever the young monster happened to be at the moment of the change, there the "adult" settled. The final stage was short but prolific. The "hive" lived entirely on the food it had stored up as a youngster. Being bisexual, it spent its brief existence in a sustained ecstasy of procreation. The young, however, were not discharged from the body. They incubated inside it, and when the shell died ate what was left of the parent. They also ate each other, but there were thousands of them, and the process of birth was so rapid that a fairly large proportion simply ate themselves to comparative safety outside.

On rare occasions, the outer shell failed to soften quickly enough for the progeny to escape their own savage appetites. At such times, the total "born" was greatly reduced.

Marenson had no trouble. As soon as he had carefully examined his surroundings, he climbed to his feet--and stood silent and cautious while he made another prolonged investigation. In that fashion, step by step, he moved toward the helicar that stood in the little open space just beyond where the first machine had crashed.

He reached it and a few minutes later was back at the camp. Clugy warned, and the entire camp finally on the alert, he took another pilot-guide--this time after both he and the pilot were tested for humanness--and flew to the distant pleasure town. News awaited him there.

The Yevd gang was caught. Janet had become suspicious of the Marensen image, and had skillfully aided in its capture. That put the security police on the trail, and it was a simple matter of following the back track of the persons involved.

It took another hour before Marensen was able to contact Janet on Paradise Planet. He sighed with relief when her face came onto the visiplate. "I was sure worried," he said, "when the Yevd here told me that my image was counting on the habits of old married couples. They evidently didn't realize why we were taking the trip."

Janet was anxious. "A police ship will be calling at Mira tomorrow," she said, "be sure to get on it, and come here as fast as you can."

She finished, "I want to spend at least part of my second honeymoon with my husband."

## WAR OF NERVES

*THE voyage of the Space Beagle--Man's first expedition to the great galaxy, M33 in Andromeda--had produced some grisly incidents. Not once, but three times, deadly attacks by aliens had been made against the 900-odd scientists under Director Morton, and the 149 military personnel commanded by Captain Leeth--all this entirely aside from the tensions that had developed among the men themselves. Hate, dislike, anxiety, ambition--of which Chief Chemist Kent's desire to be Director was but one example--permeated every activity aboard.*

*Elliott Grosvenor, the only Nexialist on the ship, sometimes had the feeling that even one more danger would be too much for the physically weary and emotionally exhausted men, who were now on the long return journey to Earth.*

*The danger came.*

Elliott Grosvenor had just said to Korita, the archeologist aboard the *Space Beagle*: "Your brief outline of cyclic history is what I've been looking for. I did have some knowledge of it, of course. It wasn't taught at the Nexial Foundation, since it's a form of philosophy. But a curious man picks up odds and ends of information."

They had paused at the "glass" room on Grosvenor's floor. It wasn't glass, and it wasn't, by strict definition, a room. It was an alcove of an outer wall corridor, and the "glass" was an enormous curving plate made from a crystal-lized form of one of the Resistance metals. It was so limpidly transparent as to give the illusion that nothing at all was there--beyond was the vacuum and darkness of space.

Korita half-turned away, then said, "I know what you mean by odds and ends. For instance, I've learned just enough about Nexialism to envy you the mind trainings you received."

At that moment, it happened--Grosvenor had noticed absently that the ship was almost through the small star cluster it had been traversing. Only a score of suns were still visible of the approximately five thousand stars that made up the system. The cluster was one of a hundred star groups accompanying Earth's galaxy through space.

Grosvenor parted his lips to say, "I'd certainly like to talk to you again, Mr. Korita."--He didn't say it. A slightly blurred double image of a woman wearing a feathered hat was taking form in the glass directly in front of him. The image flickered and shimmered. Grosvenor felt an unnatural tensing of the muscles of his eyes. For a moment, his mind went blank. That was followed rapidly by sounds, flashes of light, a sharp sensation of pain--hypnotic hallucinations! The awareness was like an electric shock. The recognition saved him. He whirled, stumbled over the unconscious body of Korita, and then he was

racing along the corridor.

As he ran, he had to look ahead in order to see his way. And yet, he had to keep blinking to break the pattern of the light flashes that came at his eyes from other images on the walls. At first, it seemed to him that the images were every-where. Then, he noticed that the woman-like shapes--some oddly double, some single--occupied transparent or translucent wall sections. There were hundreds of such reflecting areas, but at least it was a limitation. At least he knew where he had to run fastest, and where he could slow down.

He saw more men. They lay at uneven intervals along his line of flight. Twice, he came upon conscious men. One stood in his path with unseeing eyes, and did not move or turn as Grosvenor sped by. The other man let out a yell, grabbed his vibrator, and fired it. The tracer beam flashed on the wall beside Grosvenor. Grosvenor whirled, and lunged forward, knocking the man to the floor. The man--a Kent supporter--glared at him malignantly. "You damned spy!" he said harshly. "We'll get you yet." Grosvenor didn't pause. He reached his own department safely, and immediately took refuge in the film recording room. There he turned a barrage of flashing lights against the floors, the walls and the ceiling. The images were instantly eclipsed by the strong light superimposed upon them.

Quickly, Grosvenor set to work. One fact was already evident. This was mechanical visual hypnosis of such power that he had saved himself only by keeping his eyes averted, but what had happened was not limited to vision. The image had tried to control him by stimulating his brain through his eyes. He was up to date on most of the work that men had done in that field, and so he knew--though the attacker apparently did not--that control by an alien of a human nervous system was not possible except with an encephalo-adjuster or its equivalent.

He could only guess, from what had almost happened to him, that the other men had been precipitated into deep sleep trances, or else they were confused by hallucinations and were not responsible for their actions. His hope was that the woman-like beings--the enemy seemed to be feminine--were operating at a distance of several light years and so would be unable to refine their attempts at domination.

His job was to get to the control room and turn on the ship's energy screen. No matter where the attack was coming from, whether from another ship or actually from a planet, the energy screen should effectively cut off any carrier beams they might be sending.

With frantic fingers, Grosvenor worked to set up a mobile unit of lights. He needed something that would interfere with the images on his way to the control room. He was making the final connection when he felt an un-mistakable sensation, a slight giddy feeling--that passed almost instantly. Such feelings usually occurred during a considerable change of course and were a result of readjustment of the anti-accelerators. Had the course actually been changed? He couldn't stop to make sure. Hastily, Grosvenor carried his arrangement of lights to a power-driven loading vehicle in a nearby corridor, and placed it in the rear compartment. Then he climbed on and headed for the elevators.

He guessed that altogether ten minutes had gone by since he had first seen the image.

He took the turn into the elevator corridor at twenty-five miles an hour, which was fast for these comparatively narrow spaces. In the alcove opposite the elevators, two men were wrestling each other with a life and death concentration. They paid no attention to Grosvenor but swayed and strained and cursed. Their labored breathing was a loud sound in the confined area. Their single-minded hatred of each other was not affected by Grosvenor's arrangement of lights. Whatever world of hallucination they were in, it had "taken" profoundly.

Grosvenor whirled his machine into the nearest elevator and started down. He was beginning to let himself hope that he might find the control room deserted. The hope died as he came to the main corridor. It swarmed with men. Barri-cades had been flung up, and there was an unmistakable odor of ozone. Vibrators fumed and fussed. Grosvenor peered cautiously out of the elevator, trying to size up the situation. It was visibly bad. The two approaches to the control room were blocked by scores of overturned loading-mules. Behind them crouched men in military uniform. Grosvenor caught a glimpse of Captain Leeth among the defenders and, on the far side, he saw Director Morton behind the barricade of one of the attacking groups. That clarified the picture slightly. Suppressed hostility had been stimulated by

the images. The scientists were fighting the military whom they had always unconsciously hated. The military, in turn, was suddenly freed to vent its contempt and fury upon the despised scientists.

It was, Grosvenor knew, not a true picture of their feeling for each other. The human mind normally balanced innumerable opposing impulses so that the average individual might live his life-span without letting one feeling gain important ascendancy over the others. That intricate balance had now been upset. The result threatened disaster to an entire expedition of human beings, and promised victory to an enemy whose purpose could only be conjectured. Whatever the reason, the way to the control room was blocked. Reluctantly, Grosvenor retreated again to his own department.

Carefully, but quickly, he tuned a wall communicator plate to the finely balanced steering devices in the fore part of the *Space Beagle*. The sending plate there was focused directly along a series of hair-line sights. The arrangement looked more intricate than it was. As he brought his eyes to the sights, Grosvenor saw that the ship was describing a slow curve which, at its climax, would bring it to bear directly on a bright white star. A servo-mechanism had been set up to make periodic adjustments that would hold it on its course.

Still he was more puzzled than alarmed. He shifted the viewer over to the bank of supplementary instruments. According to the star's special type, magnitude and luminosity, it was just over four light-years distant. The ship's speed was up to a light year every five hours. Since it was still accelerating, that would increase on a calculable curve. He estimated roughly that the vessel would reach the vicinity of the sun in approximately eleven hours. Grosvenor's thought suffered a pause at that point. With a jerky movement, he shut off the communicator. He stood there, shocked, but not incredulous. Destruction *could* be the purpose of the deluded person who had altered the ship's course. If so, there was just about ten hours in which to prevent catastrophe.

Even at that moment, when he had no clear plan, it seemed to Grosvenor that only an attack on the enemy, using hypnotic techniques, would effectively do the job. Meanwhile--

He stood up decisively. It was time for his second attempt to get into the control room.

He needed something that would cause direct stimulation to brain cells. There were several devices that could do that. Most of them were usable for medical purposes only. The exception was the encephalo-adjuster. Though important medically, it had other uses as well. It took Grosvenor several minutes to set up one of his adjusters. Testing it consumed still more time; and, because it was such a delicate machine, he had to fasten it to his loading vehicle with a cushion of springs around it. Altogether, the preparation required thirty-seven minutes.

The presence of the encephalo-adjuster made it necessary for him to keep down the speed of his vehicle as he headed for the control room. The enforced slow-down irked him, but it also gave him an opportunity to observe the changes that had taken place since the first moment of attack. He saw only an occasional unconscious body. Grosvenor guessed that most of the men who had fallen into deep trance sleeps had awakened spontaneously. Such awakenings were a common hypnotic phenomenon. Now they were responding to other stimuli on the same chance basis. Unfortunately--although that also was to be expected--it seemed to mean that long-suppressed impulses controlled their actions.

A highly developed mind--human or alien--was a built-up structure, an intricate balance of positive and negative excitations. The more superficial impulses, having considerable freedom of expression at all times, could not endanger the whole structure. The suppressed impulses, suddenly given free rein, acted like water breaking through a dam. So men who, under normal circumstances merely disliked each other mildly, all in an instant had their dislike change to a murderous hatred. The deadly factor was that they would be unaware of the change. For the mind *could* be tangled without the individual being aware of it. It could be tangled by bad environmental association, or by the attack that was now being made against a ship-load of men. In either case, each person carried on as if his new beliefs were as soundly based as his old ones.

Grosvenor opened the elevator door on the control room level, and then drew back hastily. A heat projector was pouring flame along the corridor, the metal walls burning with a harsh, sizzling sound. Within his narrow field of vision, three men lay dead. As he waited, there was a thunderous explosion,



and instantly, the flames stopped, blue smoke hazed the air, and there was a sense of suffocating heat. Within seconds, both the haze and the heat were gone. The ventilating system was still working.

He peered out cautiously. At first sight, the corridor seemed deserted. Then he saw Morton, half-hidden in a protective alcove less than a score of feet away, and at almost the same moment, the Director saw him and beckoned him over. Grosvenor hesitated, then realized he had to take the risk. He pushed his vehicle through the elevator doorway, and darted across the intervening space. The Director greeted him eagerly as he came up.

"You're just the man I want to see," he said. "We've got to get control of the ship away from Captain Leeth before Kent and his group organize their attack."

Morton's gaze was calm and intelligent. He had the look of a man fighting for the right. Nor did it seem to occur to him that an explanation for his statement was required. The Director went on:

"We'll need your help, particularly against Kent. They're bringing up some chemical stuff I've never seen before. So far, our fans have blown it right back at them, but they're setting up fans of their own. Our big problem is, will we have time to defeat Leeth before Kent can bring his forces to bear?"

Time was also Grosvenor's problem. Unobtrusively, he brought his right hand up to his left wrist and touched the activating relay that controlled the directional sending plates of the adjuster. He pointed the plates at Morton as he said, "I've got a plan, sir, and I think it might be effective against the enemy."

He stopped. Morton was looking down. The Director said, "You've brought along an adjuster, and it's on. What do you expect from that?"

Grosvenor's first tense reaction yielded to a need for a suitable answer. He had hoped that Morton would not be too familiar with adjusters. With that hope blasted, he could still try to use the instrument, though without the initial advantage of surprise. He said in a voice that was taut in spite of himself, "That's it. It's this machine I want to use."

Morton hesitated, then said, "I gather from the thoughts coming into my mind that you're broadcasting--" He stopped. Interest quickened in his face. "Say," he said presently, "that's good. If you can put over the notion that we're being attacked by aliens--" He broke off. His lips pursed. His eyes narrowed with calculation. He said, "Captain Leeth has twice tried to make a deal with me. Now, we'll pretend to agree, and you go over with your machine. We'll attack the moment you signal us." He explained with dignity, "You understand, I would not consider dealing with either Kent or Captain Leeth except as a means to victory. You appreciate that, I hope?"

Grosvenor found Captain Leeth in the control room. The commander greeted him with stiff-backed friendliness. "This fight among the scientists," he said earnestly, "has placed the military in an awkward position. We've got to defend the control room and the engine room and so perform our minimum duty to the expedition as a whole." He shook his head gravely. "It's out of the question, of course, that either of them be allowed to win. In the final issue, we of the military are prepared to sacrifice ourselves to prevent the victory of either group." The explanation startled Grosvenor out of his own purpose. He had been wondering if Captain Leeth was responsible for aiming the ship directly at a sun. Here was at least partial confirmation. The commander's motivation seemed to be that victory for any group but the military was unthinkable. With that beginning, it was probably only a tiny step to the concept that the whole expedition must be sacrificed. Unsuspected hypnosis had stimulated the step.

Casually, Grosvenor pointed the directional sender of the adjuster at Captain Leeth. ... Brain waves, minute pulsations transmitted from axon to dendrite, from dendrite to axon, always following a previously established path depending on past associations--a process that operated endlessly among the ninety million neuron cells of a human brain. Each cell was in its own state of electro-colloidal balance, an intricate interplay of tension and impulse. Only gradually, over the years, had machines been developed that could detect with some degree of accuracy the meaning of the energy flow inside the brain.

The earliest encephalo-adjuster was an indirect descendant of the famous electro-encephalograph. But its function was the reverse of that first device. It manufactured artificial brain waves of any desired pattern. Using it, a skillful operator could stimulate any part of the brain, and so cause thoughts, emotions, and dreams, and bring up memories from the individual's past. It was not in itself a controlling instrument.

The subject maintained his own ego. However, it could transmit the mind-impulses of one person to a second person. Since the impulses varied according to the sender's thoughts, the recipient was stimulated in a highly flexible fashion.

Unaware of the presence of the adjuster, Captain Leeth did not realize that his thoughts were no longer quite his own. He said, "The attack being made on the ship by the images makes the quarrel of the scientists traitorous and unforgivable." He paused, then said thoughtfully, "Here's my plan." The plan involved heat projectors, muscle-straining acceleration, and partial extermination of both groups of scientists. Captain Leeth failed even to mention the aliens, nor did it seem to occur to him that he was describing his intentions to an emissary of what he regarded as the enemy. He finished, "Where your services will be important, Mr. Grosvenor, is in the science department. As a Nexialist, with a coordinative knowledge of many sciences, you can play a decisive role against the other scientists--"

Weary and disheartened, Grosvenor gave up. The chaos was too great for one man to overcome. Everywhere he looked were armed men. Altogether, he had seen a score or more dead bodies. At any moment the uneasy truce between Captain Leeth and Director Morton would end in a burst of projector fire. And even now he could hear the roaring of the fans where Morton was holding off Kent's attack. He sighed as he turned back to the Captain. "I'll need some equipment from my own department," he said. "Can you pass me through to the rear elevators? I can be back here in five minutes."

As he guided his machine into the backdoor of his department a few minutes later, it seemed to Grosvenor that there was no longer any doubt about what he must do. What had seemed a far-fetched idea when he first thought of it was now the only plan he had left. He must attack the alien women through their myriad images, and with their own hypnotic weapons.

As he made his preparations, Grosvenor kept wiping the perspiration from his face, and yet it was not warm. The room temperature stood at normal. Unwillingly, he paused finally to analyze his anxiety. He just didn't, he decided, know enough about the enemy. It was not sufficient that he had a theory about how they were operating. The great mystery was an enemy who had curiously woman-like faces and bodies, some partly doubled, some single. Uneasily, Grosvenor tried to imagine how Korita might analyze what was happening. In terms of cyclic history, what stage of culture could these beings be in?--The fellahin stage, he thought finally. It was actually an inevitable conclusion. A race that controlled hypnotic phenomena as did this one, would be able to stimulate each other's minds, and so would have naturally the kind of telepathy that human beings could obtain only through the encephalo-adjuster. Such beings would flash through the early stages of their culture, and arrive at the fellah stage in the swiftest possible time. *The ability to read minds without artificial aids would stultify any culture.*

Swiftly, Grosvenor went back mentally to the various civilizations of Earth history that had run their courses, apparently exhausted themselves, and then stagnated into fellahdom--Babylon, Egypt, China, Greece, Rome, and parts of west Europe. Then there were the Mayan, Toltec and Aztec cultures of early America, the East Indies, Ceylon and the mid-Pacific islanders, with their strange relics of by-gone glories--endlessly, the pattern repeated itself. Fellah folk resented newness and change, resisted it, and fought it blindly. The coming of this ship could have stirred these beings to just that kind of resistance. It seemed to Grosvenor that he had to act as if the analysis was correct. He had no other hypothesis. With such a theory as a starting point, he could try to obtain verification from one of the images. With pursed lips, he considered how it might be done. They wanted to conquer him also, of that he was sure, so accordingly, he must appear to play into their hands. A quick glance at the chronometer tensed him, as he saw he had less than seven hours to save the ship!

Hastily, he focused a beam of light through the encephalo-adjuster. With quick movements, he set a screen in front of the light, so that a small area of glass was thrown into shadow except for the intermittent light that played on it from the adjuster.

Instantly, an image appeared. It was one of the partially doubled ones, and because of the encephalo-adjuster, he was able to study it in safety. That first clear look astounded him. It was only vaguely humanoid, and yet it was under-standable how his mind had leaped to the woman identification earlier. Its overlapping double face was crowned with a neat bun of golden feathers, but its head, though

unmistakably bird-like now, did have a human appearance. There were no feathers on its face, which was covered with a lace-work of what seemed to be veins. The human appearance resulted from the way those veins had formed into groups. They gave the effect of cheeks and nose. The second pair of eyes, and the second mouth, were in each case nearly two inches above the first. They almost made a second head, which was literally growing out of the first. There was also a second pair of shoulders, with a doubled pair of short arms that ended in beautifully delicate, amazingly long hands and fingers--and the over-all effect was still feminine. Grosvenor found himself thinking that the arms and fingers of the two bodies would be likely to separate first; then the second body would be able to help support its weight. Partheno-genesis, he thought. Here were genuine hymenopters.

The image in the wall before him showed vestigial wings, and tufts of feathers were visible at the wrists. It wore a bright blue tunic over an astonishingly straight and superficially human-like body. If there were other vestiges of a feathery past, they were hidden by the clothing. What was clear was that this bird didn't and couldn't fly under its own power.

Grosvenor completed his study swiftly. His first move seemed as obvious as it was necessary. Somehow, he must convey to these beings that he would let himself be hypno-tized in exchange for information. Tentatively, he drew a picture of the image and of himself on a blackboard. Forty-seven precious minutes and scores of drawings later, the "bird" image suddenly faded from the wall. And a city scene appeared in its place. It was not a large community, and his first view of it was from a high vantage point. He had an impression of very tall, very narrow buildings clustered so close together that all the lower reaches must be lost in gloom for most of each day. Grosvenor wondered, in passing, if that might possibly reflect nocturnal habits in some primeval past. His mind leaped on. He ignored individual buildings in his desire to obtain a whole picture. Above everything else, he wanted to find out the extent of their machine culture, how they communicated, and if this was the city from which the attack on the ship was being launched.

He could see no machines, no aircraft, no cars, nor any-thing corresponding to the interstellar communication equipment used by human beings. On Earth, such communication required stations spaced over many square miles of land. It seemed likely, therefore, that this was not the origin of the attack. He had guessed, of course, that they would not show him anything vital. Even as he made his negative discovery, the view changed. He was no longer on a hill, but on a building near the center of the city. Whatever was taking that perfect color picture moved forward, and he looked down over the edge. His primary concern was with the whole scene. Yet he found himself wondering how they were showing it to him. The transition from one scene to another had been accomplished in the twinkling of an eye. Less than a minute had passed since his blackboard illustration had finally made known his desire for information.

That thought, like the others, was a flashing one. Even as he had it, he was gazing avidly down the side of the building. The space separating it from the nearby structures seemed no more than ten feet. But now he saw something that had not been visible from the hillside. The buildings were connected on every level by walks only inches wide. Along these moved the pedestrian traffic of the bird city. Directly below Grosvenor, two individuals strode towards each other along the same narrow walk, seemingly unconcerned by the fact that it was a hundred feet or more to the ground. They passed casually, easily. Each swung his outside leg wide around the other, caught the walk, bent his inside leg far out, and then they were by, without having broken pace. There were other people on other levels going through the same intricate maneuvers in the same nonchalant manner. Watching them, Grosvenor guessed that their bones were thin and hollow, and that they were lightly built.

The scene changed again, and then again. It moved from one section of the street to another. He saw, it seemed to him, every possible variation of the reproductive condition. Some were so far advanced that the legs and arms and most of the body were free. Others were as he had already seen them. In every instance, the "parent" seemed unaffected by the weight of the new body.

Grosvenor was trying to get a glimpse inside one of the dim interiors of a building when the picture began to fade from the wall. In a moment, the city had disappeared completely. In its place grew the

double image. The image-fingers pointed at the encephalo-adjuster. Its motion was unmistakable. It had fulfilled its part of the bargain. It was time for him to fulfill his. Its naïve expectation that he would do so was typically fellah. Unfortunately, he had no alternative but to carry out his "obligation".

"I am calm and relaxed," said Grosvenor's recorded voice. "My thoughts are clear. What I see is not necessarily related to what I am looking at. What I hear may be meaningless to the interpretive centers of my brain, but I have seen their city as they think it is. Whether what I actually see and hear makes sense or nonsense, I remain calm, relaxed, and at ease ..."

Grosvenor listened carefully to the words, and then nodded. The time might come, of course, when he would not consciously hear the message. But it would be there. Its patterns would impress ever more firmly on his mind. Still listening, he examined the adjuster for the last time, and all was as he wanted it. Carefully, he set the automatic cut-off for five hours. At the end of that time, unless he were dead, the limited cross connection would be broken. He would have preferred his first break to be in seconds, or minutes, but what he was about to do was not merely a scientific experiment--it was a life and death gamble. Ready for action, he put his hand on the control dial, and there he paused. For this was the moment. Within a few seconds the group mind of perhaps thousands of individual birdfolk would be in "possession" of parts of his nervous system. They would undoubtedly try to control him as they were controlling the other men on the ship.

He was fairly positive that he would be up against a group of minds working together. He had seen no machines; not even a wheeled vehicle, that most primitive of mechanical devices. For a short time, he had taken it for granted that they were using television-type cameras. Now, he guessed that he had seen the city through the eyes of individuals, as with these beings, telepathy was a sensory process as sharp as vision itself. The enmassed mindpower of millions of bird-people could hurdle light years of distance. They didn't need machines.

On Earth, and elsewhere, nearly all lower order life forms that reproduced by parthenogenesis worked together in a curious unity of purpose. It suggested an interrelation that could dispense with actual physical contact.

Fellahdom must be a long standing condition of this race. There would be no doubt in the mind of the individual about the "truth" of what it saw and heard and felt. It would be only too easy for them to settle into an inflexible pattern of existence. That pattern was now going to feel the sledge-hammer impact of new ideas. He couldn't hope to foresee the result.

Still listening to the recorder, Grosvenor manipulated the dial of the encephalo-adjuster, and slightly modified the rhythm of his own thoughts. It had to be slight. Even if he had wanted to, he could not offer the aliens complete attunement. In those rhythmic pulsations lay every variation of sanity, unsanity, and insanity. He had to restrict his reception to waves that would register "sane" on a psychologist's graph.

The adjuster superimposed them on a beam of light which in turn shone directly on the image. If the individual "behind" the image was affected by the pattern in the light, it didn't show it yet. Grosvenor did not expect overt evidence, and so he was not disappointed. He was convinced that the result would become apparent only in the changes that occurred in the patterns they were directing at him. And that, he was sure, he would have to experience with his own nervous system.

It was hard for him to concentrate on the image, but he persisted. The encephalo-adjuster began to interfere markedly with his vision, and still he stared steadily at the image.

"... I am calm and relaxed. My thoughts are clear ..."

One instant the words were loud in his ears, and the next, they were gone. In their stead was a roaring sound as of distant thunder.

The noise faded slowly. It became a steady throbbing like the murmur in a large sea shell. Grosvenor was aware of a faint light. It was far away, and had the hazy dimness of a lamp seen through thick fog. "I'm still in control," he assured himself. "I'm getting sense impressions through its nervous system. It's getting impressions through mine."

He could wait. He could sit here and wait until the darkness cleared, until his brain started to make

some kind of interpretation of the sense phenomena that were being telegraphed from that other nervous system. He could sit here and--

He stopped. "Sit!" he thought. Was that what *it* was doing? He poised intent and alert. He heard a distant voice say, "Whether what I actually see and hear makes sense or nonsense, I remain calm--" The sound of his recorded voice relieved him anew. The danger would come if his body were forced away from that reassuring sound, and away from the encephalo-adjuster. Until that threatened, he could let the alien impressions seep into him.

His nose began to itch. He thought: "They don't have noses; at least I didn't see any. Therefore, it's either my own nose, or a random stimulation." He started to reach up to scratch it, and felt a sharp pain in his stomach. He would have doubled up with the hurt of it if he had been able. He couldn't. He couldn't scratch his nose or put his hands on his abdomen.

He realized then that the itch and the pain stimuli did not derive from his own body, nor did they necessarily have any corresponding meaning in the other's nervous system. Two highly developed life forms were sending signals to each other--he hoped that he was sending signals to it also--which neither could interpret. His advantage was that he had expected it. The alien, if it was fella, and if Korita's theory was valid, hadn't and couldn't expect it. Understanding that, *he* could hope for adjustment. *It* could only become more confused.

The itch went away, and the pain in his stomach became a feeling of satiation, as if he had eaten too much. A hot needle stabbed at his spine, digging at each vertebra. Half way down, the needle turned to ice, and the ice melted and ran in a freezing stream down his back. Something--a hand? a piece of metal? a pair of tongs?--snatched at a bundle of muscles in his arm, and almost tore them out by the roots. His mind shrieked with pain messages and he almost lost consciousness.

Grosvenor was a badly shaken man when that sensation faded into nothingness. These were all illusions. No such things were happening anywhere, not in his body, not in that of the bird-being. His brain was receiving a pattern of impulses through his eyes, and was misinterpreting them. In such a relationship, pleasure could become pain, any stimulus could produce any feeling. He hadn't counted on the misinterpretations being so violent.

He forgot that as his lips were caressed by something soft and squishy. A voice said, "I am loved--" Grosvenor rejected the meaning. "No, not loved." It was, he believed, his own brain again trying to interpret sense phenomena from a nervous system that was experiencing a reaction different from any comparable human emotion. Con-sciously, he substituted the words: "I am stimulated by ..."--and then let the feeling run its course. In the end, he still didn't know what it was that he had felt. The stimulation was not unpleasant. His taste buds were titillated by a sense of sweetness, and his eyes watered. It was a relaxing process. A picture of a flower came into his mind. It was a lovely, red, Earth carnation, and thus could have no connection with the flora of the Riim world. "Riim!" he thought. His mind poised in tense fascination. Had that come to him across the gulf of space? In some irrational way, the name seemed to fit. Yet no matter what came through, a doubt would remain in his mind.

The final series of sensations had all been pleasant. Nevertheless, he waited anxiously for the next manifestation. The light remained dim and hazy--then, once more his eyes seemed to water, his feet suddenly itched intensely. The sensation passed, leaving him unaccountably hot, and weighted by a suffocating lack of air.

"False!" he told himself. "Nothing like that is happening."

The stimulations ceased. Again there was only the steady throbbing sound, and the all-pervasive blur of light. It began to worry him. It was possible that his method was right and that, given time, he would eventually be able to exercise some control over a member, or a group of members of the enemy. Time was what he could not spare. Every passing second brought him a colossal distance nearer personal destruction. Out there--here (for an instant he was confused)--in space, one of the biggest and costliest ships ever built by men was devouring the miles at a velocity that had almost no meaning.

He knew which parts of his brain were being stimulated. He could hear a noise only when sensitive areas at the side of the cortex received sensations. The brain surface above the ear, when titillated, produced dreams and old memories. In the same way, every part of the human brain had long ago been

mapped. The exact location of stimulation areas differed slightly for each individual, but the general structure, among humans, was always the same.

The normal human eye was a fairly objective mechanism. The lens focused a real image on the retina. Judging by the pictures of their city, as transmitted by the Riim-folk, they also possessed objectively accurate eyes. If he could co-ordinate his visual centers with their eyes, he would receive dependable pictures.

More minutes went by. He thought, in sudden despair: "Is it possible that I'm going to sit here the full five hours without ever making a useful contact?" For the first time, he questioned his good sense in committing himself so completely to this situation. When he tried to move his hand over to the control lever of the encephalo-adjuster, nothing seemed to happen. A number of vagrant sensations came, among them, unmistakably, the odor of burning rubber. For a third time, his eyes watered. And then, sharp and clear, a picture came. It flashed off as swiftly as it had flashed on. To Grosvenor, who had been trained by advanced tachistoscopic techniques, the after-image remained as vivid in his mind as if he had had a leisurely look. It seemed as if he were in one of the tall, narrow buildings. The interior was dimly lighted by the reflections from the sunlight that came through the open doors, as there were no windows. Instead of floors, the "residence" was fitted with catwalks. A few bird people were sitting on these walks. The walls were lined with doors, indicating the existence of cabinets and storage areas.

The visualization both excited and disturbed him. Suppose he did establish a relationship whereby he was affected by its nervous system, and it by his. Suppose he reached the point where he could hear with its ears, see with its eyes, and feel to some degree what it felt. These were sensory impressions only. Could he hope to bridge the gap, and induce motor responses in the creature's muscles? Would he be able to force it to walk, turn its head, move its arms, and, generally, make it act as his body? The attack on the ship was being made by a group working together, thinking together, feeling together. By gaining control of one member of such a group, could he exercise some control over all?

His momentary vision must have come through the eyes of one individual. What he had experienced so far did not suggest any kind of group contact. He was like a man imprisoned in a dark room with a hole in the wall in front of him covered with layers of translucent material. Through this filtered a vague light. Occasionally, images penetrated the blur, and he had glimpses of the outside world. He could be fairly certain that the pictures were accurate, but that did not apply to the sounds that came through another hole on a side wall, or the sensations that came to him through still other holes in the ceiling and floor.

Humans could hear frequencies up to 20,000 a second. That was where some races started to hear. Under hypnosis, men could be conditioned to laugh uproariously when they were being tortured, and shriek with pain when tickled. Stimulation that meant pain to one life form, could mean nothing at all to another.

Mentally, Grosvenor let the tensions seep out of him. There was nothing for him to do but to relax and wait. He waited.

It occurred to him presently that there might be a connection between his own thoughts and the sensations he received. That picture of the inside of the building--what had he thought just before it came? Principally, he recalled, he had visualized the structure of the eye. The connection was so obvious that his mind trembled with excitement. There was another thing, also. Until now, he had concentrated on the notion of seeing and feeling with the nervous system of the individual. Still the realization of his hopes depended on his establishing contact with, and control of, the group of minds that had attacked the ship.

He saw his problem, suddenly, as one that would require control of his own brain. Certain areas would have to be virtually blacked out, kept at minimum performance levels. Others must be made extremely sensitive, so that all incoming sensations found it easier to seek expression through them. As a highly trained auto-hypnotic subject, he could accomplish both objectives by suggestion. Vision came first, of course. Then muscular control of the individual, through whom the group was working against him.

Flashes of colored light interrupted his concentration. Grosvenor regarded them as evidence of the effectiveness of his suggestions. He knew that he was on the right track when his vision cleared suddenly, and stayed clear. The scene was the same. His control still sat on one of the roosts inside one of the tall

buildings. Hoping fervently that the vision was not going to fade, Grosvenor began to concentrate on moving the Riim's muscles. The trouble was that the ultimate explanation of why a movement could occur at all was obscure. His visualization had to be on a level that was already gross. Nothing happened. Shocked but determined, Grosvenor tried symbol hypnosis, using a single cue word to cover the entire complex process.

Slowly, one of the attenuated arms came up. Another cue, and his control stood up cautiously. Then he made it turn its head. The act of looking reminded the bird-being that that drawer and that cabinet and that closet were "mine". The memory barely touched the conscious level. The creature knew its own possessions and accepted the fact without concern.

Grosvenor had a hard time fighting down his excitement. With tense patience, he had the bird-being get up from a sitting position, raise its arms, lower them, and walk back and forth along the roost. Finally, he made it sit down again. He must have been keyed up, his brain responsive to the slightest suggestion. Because he had barely started to concentrate again when his whole being was flooded by a message that seemed to affect every level of his thought and feeling. More or less automatically, Grosvenor translated the anguished thoughts into familiar verbalisms.

"... The cells are calling, calling. The cells are afraid. Oh, the cells know pain! There is darkness in the Riim world. Withdraw from the being--far from Riim ... Shadows, darkness, turmoil ... The Cells must reject him ... but they cannot. They were right to try to destroy the being who came out of the great dark. The night deepens. All cells withdraw ... but they cannot ..."

Grosvenor thought exultantly: "I've got them!" After a minute of tremendous excitement, he grew sober. His problem was greater than theirs. If he broke his connection with them, they would be free. By avoiding him thereafter, they could go on to achieve the purpose of their disruptive attack ... destruction of the *Space Beagle*. He would still have the problem of overcoming Morton and the others. He had no alternative but to go on with his plan.

He concentrated first on what seemed the most logical intermediate stage:--the transfer of control to another alien. The choice, in the case of these beings, was obvious.

"I am loved!" he told himself, deliberately producing the sensation which had confused him earlier. "I am loved by my parent body, from which I am growing to wholeness. I share my parent's thoughts, but already I see with my own eyes, and know that I am one of the group ..."

The transition came suddenly, as Grosvenor had expected it might. He moved the smaller, duplicate fingers. He arched the fragile shoulders. Then he oriented himself again to the parent Riim. The experiment was so completely satisfactory that he felt ready for the bigger jump that would take him into association with the nervous system of a more distant alien. That, also, proved to be a matter of stimulating the proper brain centers. Grosvenor came to awareness standing in a wilderness of brush and hill. Directly in front of him was a narrow stream, and beyond it, an orange sun rode low in a dark purple sky that was spotted with fleecy clouds. Grosvenor made his new control turn completely around. He saw that a small roost building, the only habitation in sight, nestled among the trees farther along the stream. He walked toward the building and looked inside. In the dim interior, he made out several roosts, one with two birds sitting on it, both with eyes closed. It was quite possible, he decided, that they were participating in the group assault on the *Space Beagle*.

From there, by a variation of the stimulus, he transferred his control to an individual on a part of the planet where it was night. The transition this time was even faster. He was in a lightless city, with ghostly buildings and catwalks. Swiftly, Grosvenor moved on to association with other nervous systems. He had no clear idea why the "rapport" was established with one Riim, and not with another who fitted the same general requirement. It could be that the stimulations affected some individuals slightly faster than it affected others. It was even possible that these were descendants or body-relatives of his original parent-control. When he had been associated with more than two dozen Riim all over the planet, it seemed to Grosvenor that he had a good, over-all impression.

It was a world of brick and stone and wood, and of a neurological community relationship that would probably never be surpassed. A race had by-passed the entire machine-age of man, with its penetration

of the secrets of matter' and energy. Now, he felt, he could safely take the next-to-the-last step of his counter-attack. He concentrated on a pattern which would characterize one of the beings who had projected an image to the *Space Beagle*. (He had, then, a sense of a small but noticeable lapse of time.) Then he was looking forth from one of the images, seeing the ship through an image.

His first concern was with how the battle was progressing, but he had to restrain his will to know because to come aboard was only part of his necessary pre-conditioning. He wanted to affect a group of perhaps millions of individuals, and had to affect them so powerfully that they would have to withdraw from the *Space Beagle*, and have no recourse but to stay away from it.

He had proved that he could receive their thoughts, and that they could receive his. His association with one nervous system after another would not have been possible unless that was so. Now he was ready. He thought into the darkness:

“You live in a Universe; and within you, you form pictures of the Universe as it seems to you. Of that Universe you know nothing and can know nothing except for the pictures, but the pictures within you of the Universe are not the Universe ...”

How could you influence another's mind?--By changing his assumptions. How could you alter another's actions?--By changing his basic beliefs, his emotional certainties.

Carefully, Grosvenor went on: “And the pictures within you do not show all about the Universe, for there are many things which you cannot know directly, not having senses to know. Within the Universe there is an order, and if the order of the pictures within you is not as the order of the Universe, then you are deceived ...”

In the history of life, few thinking beings had ever done anything illogical--within their frame of reference. If the frame was falsely based, if the assumptions were untrue to reality, then the individual's automatic logic could lead him to disastrous conclusions.

The assumptions had to be changed. Grosvenor changed them, deliberately, coolly, honestly. His own basic hypo-thesis behind what he was doing was that the Riim had no defense. These were the first new ideas they had had in countless generations and he did not doubt that the impact would be colossal. This was a fellah civilization, rooted in certainties that had never before been challenged. There was ample historical evidence that a tiny intruder could influence decisively the future of entire fellahin races.

Huge old India had crumbled before a few thousand Englishmen. Similarly, all the fellah peoples of ancient Earth were taken over with ease, and did not revive till the core of their inflexible attitudes was forever shattered by the dawning realization that there was more to life than they had been taught under their rigid systems. The Riim were peculiarly vulnerable. Their method of communication, unique and wonderful though it was, made it possible to influence them all in a single intensive operation. Over and over, Grosvenor repeated his message, adding, each time, one instruction that had to do with the ship. The instruction was:

“Change the pattern you are using against those on the ship, and then withdraw it. Change the pattern, so that they can relax, and sleep ... then withdraw it ... do not attack again ...”

He had only a vague notion as to how long he actually poured his commands into that tremendous neural circuit. He guessed about two hours. Whatever the time involved, it ended as the relay switch on the encephalo-adjuster auto-matically broke the connection between himself and the image in the wall of his department. Abruptly, he was aware of the familiar surroundings of his own department. He glanced at where the image had been and tensed as he saw that it was still there, but shook his head slightly. He could hardly expect a definite reaction this soon. The Riim, also, were recovering from a connection that had just been broken.

As Grosvenor watched, the pattern of light from the image changed subtly. Grosvenor's head drooped sleepily. He sat up jerkily, remembering. The instructions he had given--to relax and sleep--this was the result. All over the ship, men would be sleeping as the new hypnotic pattern extended its inhibitory paralysis over the hemispheres of the brain.

About three minutes went by. Suddenly, the double image of the Riim vanished from the glistening wall in front of him. A moment later, Grosvenor was out in the corridor. As he raced along, he saw that



unconscious men lay everywhere but that the walls were bright and clear. Not once on his journey to the control room did he see an image.

Inside the control room, he stepped gingerly over the sleeping form of Captain Leeth, who lay on the floor near the control panel. With a sigh of relief, Grosvenor threw the switch that energized the outer screen of the ship.

Seconds later, Elliott Grosvenor was in the control chair, altering the course of the *Space Beagle*.

## THE EXPENDABLES

### I

ONE HUNDRED and nine years after leaving Earth, the spaceship, *Hope of Man*, went into orbit around Alta III.

The following "morning" Captain Browne informed the shipload of fourth and fifth generation colonists that a manned lifeboat would be dropped to the planet's surface.

"Every member of the crew must consider himself expend-able," he said earnestly. "This is the day that our great grandparents, our forefathers, who boldly set out for the new space frontier so long ago, looked forward to with unflinching courage. We must not fail them."

He concluded his announcement over the intercom system of the big ship by saying that the names of the crew members of the lifeboat would be given out within the hour. "And I know that every real man aboard will want to see his name there."

John Lesbee, the fifth of his line aboard, had a sinking sensation as he heard those words--and he was not mis-taken.

Even as he tried to decide if he should give the signal for a desperate act of rebellion, Captain Browne made the expected announcement.

The commander said, "And I know you will all join him in his moment of pride and courage when I tell you that John Lesbee will lead the crew that carries the hopes of man in this remote area of space. And now the others--"

He thereupon named seven of the nine persons with whom Lesbee had been conspiring to seize control of the ship.

Since the lifeboat would only hold eight persons, Lesbee recognized that Browne was dispatching as many of his enemies as he could. He listened with a developing dismay, as the commander ordered all persons on the ship to come to the recreation room. "Here I request that the crew of the lifeboat join me and the other officers on stage. Their instructions are to surrender themselves to any craft which seeks to intercept them. They will be equipped with instruments whereby we here can watch, and determine the stage of scientific attainments of the dominant race on the planet below."

Lesbee hurried to his room on the technicians' deck, hoping that perhaps Tellier or Cantlin would seek him out there. He felt himself in need of a council of war, however brief. He waited five minutes, but not one member of his conspiratorial group showed.

Nonetheless, he had time to grow calm. Peculiarly, it was the smell of the ship that soothed him most. From the earliest days of his life, the odor of energy and the scent of metal under stress had been perpetual companions. At the moment, with the ship in orbit, there was a letting up of stress. The smell was of old energies rather than new. But the effect was similar.

He sat in the chair he used for reading, eyes closed, breathing in that complex of odors, product of so many titanic energies. Sitting there, he felt the fear leave his mind and body. He grew brave again, and strong.

Lesbee recognized soberly that his plan to seize power had involved risks. Worse, no one would question Browne's choice of him, as the leader of the mission. "I am," thought Lesbee, "probably the most highly trained technician ever to be on this ship." Browne Three had taken him when he was ten, and started him on the long grind of learning that led him, one after the other, to master the mechanical skills of all the various technical departments. And Browne Four had continued his training.

He was taught how to repair relay systems. He gradually came to understand the purposes of countless analogs. The time came when he could visualize the entire automation. Long ago, the colossal cobweb of electronic instruments within the walls had become almost an extension of his nervous system.

During those years of work and study, each daily ap-prenticeship chore left his slim body exhausted. After he came off duty, he sought a brief relaxation and usually retired to an early rest.

He never did find the time to learn the intricate theory that underlay the ship's many operations.

His father, while he was alive, had made numerous attempts to pass his knowledge on to his son. But it was hard to teach complexities to a tired and sleepy boy. Lesbee even felt slightly relieved when his parent died. It took the pressure off him. Since then, however, he had come to realize that the Browne family, by forcing a lesser skill on the descendant of the original commander of the ship, had won their greatest victory.

As he headed finally for the recreation room, Lesbee found himself wondering: Had the Brownes trained him with the intention of preparing him for such a mission as this?

His eyes widened. If that was true, then his own con-spiracy was merely an excuse. The decision to kill him might actually have been made more than a decade ago, and light years away ...

As the lifeboat fell toward Alta III, Lesbee and Tellier sat in the twin control chairs and watched on the forward screen the vast, misty atmosphere of the planet.

Tellier was thin and intellectual, a descendant of the physicist Dr Tellier who had made many speed experiments in the early days of the voyage. It had never been understood why spaceships could not attain even a good fraction of the speed of light, let alone velocities greater than light. When the scientist met his untimely death, there was no one with the training to carry on a testing program.

It was vaguely believed by the trained personnel who succeeded Tellier that the ship had run into one of the paradoxes implicit in the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contraction theory.

Whatever the explanation, it was never solved.

Watching Tellier, Lesbee wondered if his companion and best friend felt as empty inside as he did. Incredibly, this was the first time he--or anyone--had been outside the big ship. "We're actually heading down," he thought, "to one of those great masses of land and water, a planet."

As he watched, fascinated, the massive ball grew visibly bigger.

They came in at a slant, a long, swift, angling approach, ready to jet away if any of the natural radiation belts proved too much for their defense systems. But as each stage of radiation registered in turn, the dials showed that the lifeboat machinery made the proper responses auto-matically.

The silence was shattered suddenly by an alarm bell.

Simultaneously, one of the screens focused on a point of rapidly moving light far below. The light darted toward them.

A missile!

Lesbee caught his breath.

But the shining projectile veered off, turned completely around, took up position several miles away, and began to fall with them.

His first thought was: "They'll never let us land," and he experienced an intense disappointment.

Another signal brrred from the control board.

"They're probing us," said Tellier, tensely.

An instant after the words were uttered, the lifeboat seemed to shudder and to stiffen under them. It was the unmistakable feel of a tractor beam. Its field clutched the lifeboat, drew it, held it."

The science of the Alta III inhabitants was already proving itself formidable.

Underneath him the lifeboat continued its movement.

The entire crew gathered around and watched as the point of brightness resolved into an object, which rapidly grew larger. It loomed up close, bigger than they.

There was a metallic bump. The lifeboat shuddered from stem to stern.

Even before the vibrations ceased Tellier said, "Notice they put our airlock against theirs."

Behind Lesbee, his companions began that peculiar joking of the threatened. It was a coarse comedy, but it had enough actual humor suddenly to break through his fear. Involuntarily he found himself laughing.

Then, momentarily free of anxiety, aware that Browne was watching and that there was no escape, he said, "Open the airlock! Let the aliens capture us as ordered."

## 2

A few minutes after the outer airlock was opened, the airlock of the alien ship folded back also. Rubberized devices rolled out and contacted the Earth lifeboat, sealing off both entrances from the vacuum of space.

Air hissed into the interlocking passageway between the two craft. In the alien craft's lock, an inner door opened.

Again Lesbee held his breath.

There was a movement in the passageway. A creature ambled into view. The being came forward with complete assurance, and pounded with something he held at the end of one of his four leathery arms on the hull.

The creature had four legs and four arms, and a long thin body held straight up. It had almost no neck, yet the many skin folds between the head and the body indicated great flexibility was possible.

Even as Lesbee noted the details of its appearance, the being turned his head slightly, and its two large expression-less eyes gazed straight at the hidden wall receptor that was photographing the scene, and therefore straight into Lesbee's eyes.

Lesbee blinked at the creature, then tore his gaze away, swallowed hard, and nodded at Tellier. "Open up!" he commanded.

The moment the inner door of the Earth lifeboat opened, six more of the four-legged beings appeared one after another in the passageway, and walked forward in the same confident way as had the first.

All seven creatures entered the open door of the lifeboat.

As they entered, their thoughts came instantly into Lesbee's mind ...

As Dzing and his boarding party trotted from the small Karn ship through the connecting airlock, his chief officer thought a message to him.

"Air pressure and oxygen content are within a tiny per-centage of what exists at ground level on Karn. They can certainly live on our planet."

Dzing moved forward into the Earth ship, and realized that he was in the craft's control chamber. There, for the first time, he saw the men. He and his crew ceased their forward motion; and the two groups of beings--the humans and the Karn--gazed at each other.

The appearance of the two-legged beings did not surprise Dzing. Pulse viewers had, earlier, penetrated the metal walls of the lifeboat and had accurately photographed the shape and dimension of those aboard.

His first instruction to his crew was designed to test if the strangers were, in fact, surrendering. He commanded: "Convey to the prisoners that we require them as a precaution to remove their clothing."

... Until that direction was given, Lesbee was still uncertain as to whether or not these beings could receive human thoughts as he was receiving theirs. From the first moment, the aliens had conducted their mental conversations *as if* they were unaware of the thoughts of the human beings. Now he watched the Karn come forward. One tugged suggestively at his clothing. And there was no doubt.

The mental telepathy was a one-way flow only--from the Karn to the humans.

He was already savoring the implications of that as he hastily undressed ... It was absolutely vital that Browne do not find it out.

Lesbee removed all his clothes; then, before laying them down, took out his notebook and pen. Standing there naked he wrote hurriedly:

“Don’t let on that we can read the minds of these beings.”

He handed the notebook around, and he felt a lot better as each of the men read it, and nodded at him silently.

Dzing communicated telepathically with someone on the ground. “These strangers,” he reported, “clearly acted under command to surrender. The problem is, how can we now let them overcome us without arousing their suspicion that this is what we want them to do?”

Lesbee did not receive the answer directly. But he picked it up from Dzing’s mind: “Start tearing the lifeboat apart. See if that brings a reaction.”

The members of the Karn boarding party went to work at once. Off came the control panels; floor plates were melted and ripped up. Soon instruments, wiring, controls were exposed for examination. Most interesting of all to the aliens were the numerous computers and their accessories.

Browne must have watched the destruction; for now, before the Kara could start wrecking the automatic machin-ery, his voice interjected:

“Watch out, you men! I’m going to shut your airlock and cause your boat to make a sharp right turn in exactly twenty seconds.”

For Lesbee and Tellier that simply meant sitting down in their chairs, and turning them so that the acceleration pressure would press them against the backs. The other men sank to the ripped-up floor, and braced themselves.

Underneath Dzing, the ship swerved. The turn began slowly, but it propelled him and his fellows over to one wall of the control room. There he grabbed with his numerous hands at some handholds that had suddenly moved out from the smooth metal. By the time the turn grew sharper, he had his four short legs braced, and he took the rest of the wide swing around with every part of his long, sleek body taut. His companions did the same.

Presently, the awful pressure eased up, and he was able to estimate that their new direction was almost at right angles to what it had been.

He had reported what was happening while it was going on. Now, the answer came: “Keep on destroying. See what they do, and be prepared to succumb to anything that looks like a lethal attack.”

Lesbee wrote quickly in his notebook: “Our method of capturing them doesn’t have to be subtle. They’ll make it easy for us--so we can’t lose.”

Lesbee waited tensely as the notebook was passed around. It was still hard for him to believe that no one else had noticed what he had about this boarding party.

Tellier added a note of his own: “It’s obvious now that these beings were also instructed to consider themselves expendable.”

And that settled it for Lesbee. The others hadn’t noticed what he had. He sighed with relief at the false analysis, for it gave him that most perfect of all advantages: that which derived from his special education.

Apparently, he alone knew enough to have analyzed what these creatures were.

The proof was in the immense clarity of their thoughts. Long ago, on earth, it had been established that man had a faltering telepathic ability, which could be utilized consistently only by electronic amplification *outside* his brain. The amount of energy needed for the step-up process was enough to burn out brain nerves, if applied directly.

Since the Karn were utilizing it directly, they couldn’t be living beings.

Therefore, Dzing and his fellows were an advanced robot type.

The true inhabitants of Alta III were not risking their own skins at all.

Far more important to Lesbee, he could see how he might use these marvelous mechanisms to defeat Browne, take over the *Hope of Man*, and start the long journey back to Earth.

He had been watching the Karn at their work of destruction, while he had these thoughts. Now, he said aloud: "Hainker, Graves."

"Yes?" The two men spoke together.

"In a few moments I'm going to ask Captain Browne to turn the ship again. When he does, use our specimen gas guns!"

The men grinned with relief. "Consider it done," said Hainker.

Lesbee ordered the other four crewmen to be ready to use the specimen-holding devices at top speed. To Tellier he said, "You take charge if anything happens to me."

Then he wrote one more message in the notebook: "These beings will probably continue their mental inter-communication after they are apparently rendered un-conscious. Pay no attention, and do not comment on it in any way."

He felt a lot better when that statement also had been read by the others, and the notebook was once more in his possession. Quickly, he spoke to the screen:

"Captain Browne! Make another turn, just enough to pin them."

And so they captured Dzing and his crew.

As he had expected, the Karn continued their telepathic conversation. Dzing reported to his ground contact: "I think we did that rather well."

There must have been an answering message from below, because he went on, "Yes, commander. We are now prisoners as per your instructions, and shall await events ... The imprisoning method? Each of us is pinned down by a machine which has been placed astride us, with the main section adjusted to the contour of our bodies. A series of rigid metal appendages fasten our arms and legs. All these devices are electronically controlled, and we can of course escape at any time. Naturally, such action is for later ..."

Lesbee was chilled by the analysis; but for expendables there was no turning back.

He ordered his men: "Get dressed. Then start repairing the ship. Put all the floor plates back except the section at G-8. They removed some of the analogs, and I'd better make sure myself that it all goes back all right."

When he had dressed, he reset the course of the lifeboat, and called Browne. The screen lit up after a moment, and there staring back at him was the unhappy countenance of the forty-year-old officer.

Browne said glumly: "I want to congratulate you and your crew on your accomplishments. It would seem that we have a small scientific superiority over this race, and that we can attempt a limited landing."

Since there would never be a landing on Alta III, Lesbee simply waited without comment as Browne seemed lost in thought.

The officer stirred finally. He still seemed uncertain. "Mr. Lesbee," he said, "as you must understand, this is an extremely dangerous situation for me--and"--he added hastily--"for this entire expedition."

What struck Lesbee, as he heard those words, was that Browne was not going to let him back on the ship. But he had to get aboard to accomplish his own purpose. He thought: "I'll have to bring this whole conspiracy out into the open, and apparently make a compromise offer."

He drew a deep breath, gazed straight into the eyes of Browne's image on the screen and said with the complete courage of a man for whom there is no turning back: "It seems to me, sir, that we have two alternatives. We can re-solve all these personal problems either through a demo-cratic election or by a joint captaincy, you being one of the captains and I being the other."

To any other person who might have been listening the remark must have seemed a complete non sequitur. Browne, however, understood its relevance. He said with a sneer, "So you're out in the open. Well, let me tell you, Mr. Lesbee, there was never any talk of elections when the Lesbees were in power. And for a very good reason. A spaceship requires a technical aristocracy to command it. As for a joint captaincy, it wouldn't work."

Lesbee urged his lie: "If we're going to stay here, we'll need at least two people of equal

authority--one on the ground, one on the ship.”

“I couldn’t trust you on the ship!” said Browne flatly.

“Then you be on the ship,” Lesbee proposed. “All such practical details can be arranged.”

The older man must have been almost beside himself with the intensity of his own feelings on this subject. He flashed, “Your family has been out of power for over fifty years! How can you still feel that you have any rights?”

Lesbee countered, “How come you still know what I’m talking about?”

Browne said, a grinding rage in his tone, “The concept of inherited power was introduced by the first Lesbee. It was never planned.”

“But here you are,” said Lesbee, “yourself a beneficiary of inherited power.”

Browne said from between clenched teeth: “It’s absolutely ridiculous that the Earth government which was in power when the ship left--and every member of which has been long dead--should appoint somebody to a command position ... and that now his descendant think that command post should be his, and his family’s, for all time!”

Lesbee was silent, startled by the dark emotions he had uncovered in the man. He felt even more justified, if that were possible, and advanced his next suggestion without a qualm.

“Captain, this is a crisis. We should postpone our private struggle. Why don’t we bring one of these prisoners aboard so that we can question him by use of films, or play acting? Later, we can discuss your situation and mine.”

He saw from the look on Browne’s face that the reason-ableness of the suggestion, *and its potentialities*, were penetrating.

Browne said quickly, “Only you come aboard--and with one prisoner only. No one else!”

Lesbee felt a dizzying thrill as the man responded to his bait. He thought: “It’s like an exercise in logic. He’ll try to murder me as soon as he gets me alone and is satisfied that he can attack without danger to himself. But that very scheme is what will get me aboard. And I’ve got to get on the ship to carry out *my* plan.”

Browne was frowning. He said in a concerned tone: “Mr. Lesbee, can you think of any reason why we should not bring one of these beings aboard?”

Lesbee shook his head. “No reason, sir,” he lied.

Browne seemed to come to a decision. “Very well. I’ll see you shortly, and we can then discuss additional details.”

Lesbee dared not say another word. He nodded, and broke the connection, shuddering, disturbed, uneasy. “But,” he thought, “what else can we do?”

He turned his attention to the part of the floor that had been left open for him. Quickly, he bent down and studied the codes on each of the programming units, as if he were seeking exactly the right ones that had originally been in those slots.

He found the series he wanted: an intricate system of cross-connected units that had originally been designed to program a remote-control landing system, an advanced Waldo mechanism capable of landing the craft on a planet and taking off again, all directed on the pulse level of human thought.

He slid each unit of the series into its sequential position and locked it in.

Then, that important task completed, he picked up the remote control attachment for the series and casually put it in his pocket.

He returned to the control board and spent several minutes examining the wiring and comparing it with a wall chart. A number of wires had been torn loose. These he now re-connected, and at the same time he managed with a twist of his pliers to short-circuit a key relay of the remote control pilot.

Lesbee replaced the panel itself loosely. There was no time to connect it properly. And, since he could easily justify his next move, he pulled a cage out of the storeroom. Into this he hoisted Dzing, manacles and all.

Before lowering the lid he rigged into the cage a simple resistor that would prevent the Karn from broadcasting on the human thought level. The device was simple merely in that it was not selective. It had

an on-off switch which triggered, or stopped, energy flow in the metal walls on the thought level.

When the device was installed, Lesbee slipped the tiny remote control for *it* into his other pocket. He did not activate the control. Not yet.

From the cage Dzing telepathed: "It is significant that these beings have selected me for this special attention. We might conclude that it is a matter of mathematical accident, or else that they are very observant and so noticed that I was the one who directed activities. Whatever the reason, it would be foolish to turn back now."

A bell began to ring. As Lesbee watched, a spot of light appeared high on one of the screens. It moved rapidly toward some crossed lines in the exact center of the screen. Inexorably, then, the *Hope of Man*, as represented by the light, and the lifeboat moved toward their fateful rendez-vous.

#### 4

Browne's instructions were: "Come to Control Room Below!"

Lesbee guided his powered dolly with the cage on it out of the big ship's airlock P--and saw that the man in the control room of the lock was Second Officer Selwyn. Heavy brass for such a routine task. Selwyn waved at him with a twisted smile as Lesbee wheeled his cargo along the silent corridor.

He saw no one else on his route. Other personnel had evidently been cleared from this part of the vessel. A little later, grim and determined, he set the cage down in the center of the big room and anchored it magnetically to the floor.

As Lesbee entered the captain's office, Browne looked up from one of the two control chairs and stepped down from the rubber-sheathed dais to the same level as Lesbee. He came forward, smiling, and held out his hand. He was a big man, as all the Brownes had been, bigger by a head than Lesbee, good-looking in a clean-cut way. The two men were alone.

"I'm glad you were so frank," he said. "I doubt if I could have spoken so bluntly to you without your initiative as an example."

But as they shook hands, Lesbee was wary and suspicious. Lesbee thought: "He's trying to recover from the insanity of his reaction. I really blew him wide open."

Browne continued in the same hearty tone: "I've made up my mind. An election is out of the question. The ship is swarming with untrained dissident groups, most of which simply want to go back to Earth."

Lesbee, who had the same desire, was discreetly silent.

Browne said, "You'll be ground captain; I'll be ship captain. Why don't we sit down right now and work out a communiqué on which we can agree and that I can read over the intercom to the others?"

As Lesbee seated himself in the chair beside Browne, he was thinking: "What can be gained from publicly naming me ground captain?"

He concluded finally, cynically, that the older man could gain the confidence of John Lesbee--lull him, lead him on, delude him, destroy him.

Surreptitiously Lesbee examined the room. Control Room Below was a large square chamber adjoining the massive central engines. Its control board was a duplicate of the one on the bridge located at the top of the ship. The great vessel could be guided equally from either board, except that pre-emptive power was on the bridge. The officer of the watch was given the right to make Merit decisions in an emergency.

Lesbee made a quick mental calculation, and deduced that it was First Officer Miller's watch on the bridge. Miller was a staunch supporter of Browne. The man was probably watching them on one of his screens, ready to come to Browne's aid at a moment's notice.

A few minutes later, Lesbee listened thoughtfully as Browne read their joint communiqué over the intercom, designating him as ground captain. He found himself a little amazed, and considerably dismayed, at the absolute confidence the older man must feel about his own power and position on the ship. It was a big step, naming his chief rival to so high a rank.

Browne's next act was equally surprising. While they were still on the viewers, Browne reached over,

clapped Lesbee affectionately on the shoulders and said to the watching audience:

“As you all know, John is the only direct descendant of the original captain. No one knows exactly what happened half a hundred years ago when my grandfather first took command. But I remember the old man always felt that only he understood how things should be. I doubt if he had any confidence in *any* young whippersnapper over whom he did not have complete control. I often felt that my father was the victim rather than the beneficiary of my grand-father’s temper and feelings of superiority.”

Browne smiled engagingly. “Anyway, good people,-though we can’t unbreak the eggs that were broken then, we can certainly start healing the wounds, without”--his tone was suddenly firm--“negating the fact that my own training and experience make me the proper commander of the ship itself.”

He broke off. “Captain Lesbee and I shall now jointly attempt to communicate with the captured intelligent life form from the planet below. You may watch, though we reserve the right to cut you off for good reason.” He turned to Lesbee. “What do you think we should do first, John?”

Lesbee was in a dilemma. The first large doubt had come to him, the possibility that perhaps the other was sincere. The possibility was especially disturbing because in a few moments a part of his own plan would be revealed.

He sighed, and realized that there was. no turning back at this stage. He thought: “We’ll have to bring the entire madness out into the open, and only then can we begin to consider agreement as real.”

Aloud, he said in a steady voice, “Why not bring the prisoner out where we can see him?”

As the tractor beam lifted Dzing out of the cage, and thus away from the energies that had suppressed his thought waves, the Karn telepathed to his contact on Alta III:

“Have been held in a confined space, the metal of which was energized against communication. I shall now attempt to perceive and evaluate the condition and performance of this ship--”

At that point, Browne reached over and clicked off the intercom. Having shut off the audience, he turned accusingly to Lesbee, and said, “Explain your failure to inform me that these beings communicated by telepathy.”

The tone of his voice was threatening. There was a hint of angry color in his face.

It was the moment of discovery.

Lesbee hesitated, and then simply pointed out how pre-carious their relationship had been. He finished frankly, “I thought by keeping it a secret I might be able to stay alive a little longer, which was certainly not what you intended when you sent me out as an expendable.”

Browne snapped, “But how did you hope to utilize--?”

He stopped. “Never mind,” he muttered.

Dzing was telepathing again:

“In many ways this is mechanically a very advanced type ship. Atomic energy drives are correctly installed. The automatic machinery performs magnificently. There is massive energy screen equipment, and they can put out a tractor beam to match anything we have that’s mobile. But there is a wrongness in the energy flows of this ship, which I lack the experience to interpret. Let me furnish you some data ...”

The data consisted of variable wave measurements, evidently--so Lesbee deduced--the wavelengths of the energy flows involved in the “wrongness”.

He said in alarm at that point, “Better drop him into the cage while *we* analyze what he could be talking about.”

Browne did so--as Dzing telepathed: “If what you suggest is true, then these beings are completely at our mercy--”

*Cut off!*

Browne was turning on the intercom. “Sorry I had to cut you good people off,” he said. “You’ll be interested to know that we have managed to tune in on the thought pulses of the prisoner and have intercepted his calls to someone on the planet below. This gives us an advantage.” He turned to Lesbee. “Don’t you agree?”

Browne visibly showed no anxiety, whereas Dzing’s final statement flabbergasted Lesbee. “... *completely at our mercy* ...” surely meant exactly that. He was staggered that Browne could have



missed the momentous meaning.

Browne addressed him enthusiastically. "I'm excited by this telepathy! It's a marvelous short-cut to communication, if we could build up our own thought pulses. Maybe we could use the principle of the remote-control landing device which, as you know, can project human thoughts on a simple, gross level, where ordinary energies get confused by the intense field needed for the landing."

What interested Lesbee in the suggestion was that he had in his pocket a remote control for precisely such mechanically produced thought pulses. Unfortunately, the control was for the lifeboat. It probably would be advisable to tune the control to the ship landing system also. It was a problem he had thought of earlier, and now Browne had opened the way for an easy solution.

He held his voice steady as he said, "Captain, let me program those landing analogs while you prepare the film communication project. That way we can be ready for him either way."

Browne seemed to be completely trusting, for he agreed at once.

At Browne's direction, a film projector was wheeled in. It was swiftly mounted on solid connections at one end of the room. The cameraman and Third Officer Mindel--who had come in with him--strapped themselves into two adjoining chairs attached to the projector, and were evidently ready.

While this was going on, Lesbee called various technical personnel. Only one technician protested. "But, John," he said, "that way we have a double control--with the lifeboat control having pre-emption over the ship. That's very unusual."

It was unusual. But it was the lifeboat control that was in his pocket where he could reach it quickly; and so he said adamantly, "Do you want to talk to Captain Browne? Do you want his okay?"

"No, no." The technician's doubts seemed to subside. "I heard you being named joint captain. You're the boss. It shall be done."

Lesbee put down the closed-circuit phone into which he had been talking, and turned. It was then he saw that the film was ready to roll, and that Browne had his fingers on the controls of the tractor beam. The older man stared at him questioningly.

"Shall I go ahead?" he asked.

At this penultimate moment, Lesbee had a qualm.

Almost immediately he realized that the only alternative to what Browne planned was that he reveal his own secret knowledge.

He hesitated, torn by doubts. Then: "Will you turn that off?" He indicated the intercom.

Browne said to the audience, "We'll bring you in again on this in a minute, good people." He broke the connection and gazed questioningly at Lesbee.

Whereupon Lesbee said in a low voice, "Captain, I should inform you that I brought the Karn aboard in the hope of using him against you."

"Well, that is a frank and open admission," the officer replied very softly.

"I mention this," said Lesbee, "because if you had similar ulterior motives, we should clear the air completely before proceeding with this attempt at communication."

A blossom of color spread from Browne's neck over his face. At last he said slowly, "I don't know how I can convince you, but I had no schemes."

Lesbee gazed at Browne's open countenance, and suddenly he realized that the officer was sincere. Browne had accepted the compromise. The solution of a joint captaincy was agreeable to him.

Sitting there, Lesbee experienced an enormous joy. Seconds went by before he realized what underlay the intense pleasurable excitement. It was simply the discovery that--communication worked. You could tell your truth and get a hearing ... if it made sense.

It seemed to him that his truth made a lot of sense. He was offering Browne peace aboard the ship. Peace at a price, of course; but still peace. And in this severe emergency Browne recognized the entire validity of the solution.

So it was now evident to Lesbee.

Without further hesitation he told Browne that the creatures who had boarded the lifeboat, were robots--not alive at all.

Browne was nodding thoughtfully. Finally he said: "But I don't see how this could be utilized to take over the ship."

Lesbee said patiently, "As you know, sir, the remote landing control system includes five principal ideas which are projected very forcibly on the thought level. Three of these are for guidance--up, down and sideways. Intense magnetic fields, any one of which could partially jam a complex robot's thinking process. The fourth and fifth are instructions to blast either up or down. The force of the blast depends on how far the control is turned on. Since the energy used is overwhelming, those simple commands would take pre-emption over the robot. When that first one came aboard the lifeboat, I had a scan receiver--nondetectable--on him. This registered two power sources, one pointing forward, one backward, from the chest level. That's why I had him on his back when I brought him in here. But the fact is I could have had him tilted and pointing at a target, and activated either control four or five, thus destroying whatever was in the path of the resulting blast. Naturally, I took all possible precautions to make sure that this did not happen until you had indicated what you intended to do. One of these precautions would enable us to catch this creature's thoughts without--"

As he was speaking, he eagerly put his hand into his pocket, intending to show the older man the tiny on-off control device by which--when it was off--they would be able to read Dzing's thoughts without removing him from the cage.

He stopped short in his explanation, because an ugly expression had come suddenly into Browne's face.

The big man glanced at Third Officer Mindel. "Well, Dan," he said, "do you think that's it?"

Lesbee noticed with shock that Mindel had on sound amplifying earphones. He must have overheard every word that Browne and he had spoken to each other.

Mindel nodded. "Yes, Captain," he said. "I very definitely think he has now told us what we wanted to find out."

Lesbee grew aware that Browne had released himself from his acceleration safety belt and was stepping away from his seat. The officer turned and, standing very straight, said in a formal tone:

"Technician Lesbee, we have heard your admission of gross dereliction of duty, conspiracy to overthrow the lawful government of this ship, scheme to utilize alien creatures to destroy human beings, and confession of other unspeakable crimes. In this extremely dangerous situation, summary execution without formal trial is justified. I therefore sentence you to death and order Third Officer Dan Mindel to--" He faltered, and came to a stop.

## 5

Two things had been happening as he talked. Lesbee squeezed the "off" switch of the cage control, an entirely automatic gesture, convulsive, a spasmodic movement, result of his dismay. It was a mindless gesture. So far as he knew consciously, freeing Dzing's thoughts had no useful possibility for him. His only real hope--as he realized almost immediately--was to get his other hand into his remaining coat pocket and with it manipulate the remote-control landing device, the secret of which he had so naively revealed to Browne.

The second thing that happened was that Dzing, released from mental control, telephated:

"Free again--and this time of course permanently! I have just now activated by remote control the relays that will in a few moments start the engines of this ship, and I have naturally re-set the mechanism for controlling the rate of acceleration--"

His thoughts must have impinged progressively on Browne, for it was at that point that the officer paused uncertainly.

Dzing continued: "I verified your analysis. This vessel does not have the internal energy flows of an interstellar ship. These two-legged beings have therefore failed to achieve the Light Speed Effect which alone makes possible trans-light velocities. I suspect they have taken many generations to make this journey, are far indeed from their home base, and I'm sure I can capture them all."

Lesbee reached over, tripped on the intercom and yelled at the screen: "All stations prepare for emergency acceleration! Grab anything!"

To Browne he shouted: "Get to your seat--*quick!*"

His actions were automatic responses to danger. Only after the words were spoken did it occur to him that he had no interest in the survival of Captain Browne. And that in fact the only reason the man was in danger was because he had stepped away from his safety belt, so that Mindel's blaster would kill Lesbee without damaging Browne.

Browne evidently understood his danger. He started toward the control chair from which he had released himself only moments before. His reaching hands were still a foot or more from it when the impact of Acceleration One stopped him. He stood there trembling like a man who had struck an invisible but palpable wall. The next instant Acceleration Two caught him and thrust him on his back to the floor. He began to slide toward the rear of the room, faster and faster, and because he was quick and understanding he pressed the palms of his hands and his rubber shoes hard against the floor and so tried to slow the movement of his body.

Lesbee was picturing other people elsewhere in the ship desperately trying to save themselves. He groaned, for the commander's failure was probably being duplicated everywhere.

Even as he had that thought, Acceleration Three caught Browne. Like a rock propelled by a catapult he shot toward the rear wall. It was cushioned to protect human beings, and so it reacted like rubber, bouncing him a little. But the stuff had only momentary resilience.

Acceleration Four pinned Browne halfway into the cushioned wall. From its imprisoning depths, he managed a strangled yell.

"Lesbee, put a tractor beam on me! Save me! I'll make it up to you. I--"

Acceleration Five choked off the words.

The man's appeal brought momentary wonder to Lesbee. He was amazed that Browne hoped for mercy ... after what had happened.

Browne's anguished words did produce one effect in him. They reminded him that there was something he must do. He forced his hand and his arm to the control board and focused a tractor beam that firmly captured Third Officer Mindel and the cameraman. His intense effort was barely in time. Acceleration followed acceleration, making movement impossible. The time between each surge of increased speed grew longer. The slow minutes lengthened into what seemed an hour, then many hours. Lesbee was held in his chair as if he were gripped by hands of steel. His eyes felt glassy; his body had long since lost all feeling.

He noticed something.

The rate of acceleration was different from what the original Tellier had prescribed long ago. The actual increase in forward pressure each time was less.

He realized something else. For a long time, no thoughts had come from the Karn.

Suddenly, he felt an odd shift in speed. A physical sensation of slight, very slight, angular movement accompanied the maneuver.

Slowly, the metal-like bands let go of his body. The numb feeling was replaced by the pricking as of thousands of tiny needles. Instead of muscle-compressing acceleration there was only a steady pressure.

It was the pressure that he had in the past equated with gravity.

Lesbee stirred hopefully, and when he felt himself move, realized what had happened. The artificial gravity had been shut off. Simultaneously, the ship had made a half turn within its outer shell. The drive power was now coming from below, a constant one gravity thrust.

At this late, late moment, he plunged his Hand into the pocket which held the remote control for the pilotless landing mechanism--and activated it.

"That ought to turn on his thoughts," he told himself savagely.

But if Dzing was telepathing to his masters, it was no longer on the human thought level. So Lesbee concluded unhappily.

The ether was silent.

He now grew aware of something more. The ship smelled different: better, cleaner, purer.

Lesbee's gaze snapped over to the speed dials on the control board. The figures registering there were unbelievable. They indicated that the spaceship was traveling at a solid fraction of the speed of light.

Lesbee stared at the numbers incredulously. "We didn't have time!" he thought. "How could we go so fast so quickly--in hours only to near the speed of light!"

Sitting there, breathing hard, fighting to recover from the effects of that prolonged speed-up, he felt the fantastic reality of the universe. During all this slow century of flight through space, the *Hope of Man* had had the potential for this vastly greater velocity.

He visualized the acceleration series so expertly pro-programmed by Dzing as having achieved a shift to a new state of matter in motion. The "light speed effect", the Karn robot had called it.

"And Tellier missed it," he thought.

All those experiments the physicist had performed so painstakingly, and left a record of, had missed the great discovery.

Missed it! And so a shipload of human beings had wandered for generations through the black deeps of interstellar space.

Across the room Browne was climbing groggily to his feet. He muttered, "... Better get back to ... control chair."

He had taken only a few uncertain steps when a realization seemed to strike him. He looked up then, and stared wildly at Lesbee. "Oh!" he said. The sound came from the gut level, a gasp of horrified understanding.

As he slapped a complex of tractor beams on Browne, Lesbee said, "That's right, you're looking at your enemy. Better start talking. We haven't much time."

Browne was pale now. But his mouth had been left free and so he was able to say huskily, "I did what any lawful government does in an emergency. I dealt with treason summarily, taking time only to find out what it consisted of."

Lesbee had had another thought, this time about Miller on the bridge. Hastily, he swung Browne over in front of him. "Hand me your blaster," he said. "Stock first."

He freed the other's arm, so that he could reach into the holster and take it out.

Lesbee felt a lot better when he had the weapon. But still another idea had come to him. He said harshly, "I want to lift you over to the cage, and I don't want First Officer Miller to interfere. Get that, *Mister Miller!*"

There was no answer from the screen.

Browne said uneasily, "Why over to the cage?"

Lesbee did not answer right away. Silently he manipulated the tractor beam control until Browne was in position. Having gotten him there, Lesbee hesitated. What bothered him was, why had the Karn's thought impulses ceased? He had an awful feeling that something was very wrong indeed.

He gulped, and said, "Raise the lid!"

Again, he freed Browne's arm. The big man reached over gingerly, unfastened the catch, and then drew back and glanced questioningly at Lesbee.

"Look inside!" Lesbee commanded.

Browne said scathingly, "You don't think for one second that--" He stopped, for he was peering into the cage. He uttered a cry: "He's gone!"

## 6

Lesbee discussed the disappearance with Browne.

It was an abrupt decision on his part to do so. The question of where Dzing might have got to was not something he should merely turn over in his own head.

He began by pointing at the dials from which the immense speed of the ship could be computed, and then, when that meaning was absorbed by the older man, said simply, "What happened? Where did he

go? And how could we speed up to just under 186,000 miles a second in so short a time?"

He had lowered the big man to the floor, and now he took some of the tension from the tractor beam but did not release the power. Browne stood in apparent deep thought. Finally, he nodded. "AH right," he said, "I know what happened."

"Tell me."

Browne changed the subject, said in a deliberate tone, "What are you going to do with me?"

Lesbee stared at him for a moment unbelievably. "You're going to withhold this information?" he demanded.

Browne spread his hands. "What else can I do? Till I know my fate, I have nothing to lose."

Lesbee suppressed a strong impulse to rush over and strike his prisoner. He said finally, "In your judgment is this delay dangerous?"

Browne was silent, but a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. "I have nothing to lose," he repeated.

The expression in Lesbee's face must have alarmed him, for he went on quickly, "Look, there's no need for you to conspire any more. What you really want is to go home, isn't it? Don't you see, with this new method of acceleration, we can make it to Earth in a few *months*!"

He stopped. He seemed momentarily uncertain.

Lesbee snapped angrily, "Who are you trying to fool? Months! We're a dozen light years in actual distance from Earth. You mean years, not months."

Browne hesitated then: "All right, a few years. But at least not a lifetime. So if you'll promise not to scheme against me further, I'll promise--"

"*You'll* promise!" Lesbee spoke savagely. He had been taken aback by Browne's instant attempt at blackmail. But the momentary sense of defeat was gone. He knew with a stubborn rage that he would stand for no nonsense.

He said in an uncompromising voice, "Mister Browne, twenty seconds after I stop speaking, you start talking. If you don't, I'll batter you against these walls. I mean it!"

Browne was pale. "Are you going to kill me? That's all I want to know. Look"--his tone was urgent--"we don't have to fight any more. We can go home. Don't you see? The long madness is just about over. Nobody has to die."

Lesbee hesitated. What the big man said was at least partly true. There was an attempt here to make twelve years sound like twelve days, or at most twelve weeks. But the fact was, it *was* a short period compared to the cen-tury-long journey which, at one time, had been the only possibility.

He thought: "Am I going to kill him?"

It was hard to believe that he would, under the circum-stances. All right. If not death, then what? He sat there uncertain. The vital seconds went by, and he could see no solution. He thought finally, in desperation: "I'll have to give in for the moment. Even a minute thinking about this is absolutely crazy."

He said aloud in utter frustration, "I'll promise you this. If you can figure out how I can feel safe in a ship com-manded by you I'll give your plan consideration. And now, mister, start talking."

Browne nodded. "I accept that promise," he said. "What we've run into here is the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contraction Theory. Only it's not a theory any more. We're living the reality of it."

Lesbee argued, "But it only took us a few hours to get to the speed of light."

Browne said, "As we approach light speed, space fore-shortens and time compresses. What seemed like a few hours would be days in normal time and space."

What Browne explained then was different rather than difficult. Lesbee had to blink his mind to shut out the glare of his old ideas and habits of thought, so that the more subtle shades of super-speed phenomena could shine through into his awareness.

The time compression--as Browne explained it--was gradational. The rapid initial series of accelerations were obviously designed to pin down the personnel of the ship. Subsequent increments would be according to what was necessary to attain the ultra-speed finally achieved.

Since the drive was still on, it was clear that some resist-ance was being encountered, perhaps from the fabric of space itself.

It was no time to discuss technical details. Lesbee accepted the remarkable reality and said quickly, "Yes, but where is Dzing?"

"My guess," said Browne, "is that he did not come along."

"How do you mean?"

The space-time foreshortening did not affect him."

"But--" Lesbee began blankly.

"Look," said Browne harshly, "don't ask me how he did it. My picture is, he stayed in the cage till after the acceleration stopped. Then, in a leisurely fashion, he released himself from the electrically locked manacles, climbed out, and went off to some other part of the ship. He wouldn't have to hurry since by this time he was operating at a rate of, say, five hundred times faster than our living pace."

Lesbee said, "But that means he's been out there for hours--his time. What's he been up to?"

Browne admitted that he had no answer for that.

"But you can see," he pointed out anxiously, "that I meant what I said about going back to Earth. We have no business in this part of space. These beings are far ahead of us scientifically."

His purpose was obviously to persuade. Lesbee thought: "He's back to *our* fight. That's more important to him than any damage the real enemy is causing."

A vague recollection came of the things he had read about the struggle for power throughout Earth history. How men intrigued for supremacy while vast hordes of the invader battered down the gates. Browne was a true spiritual descendant of all those mad people.

Slowly, Lesbee turned and faced the big board. What was baffling to him was, what could you do against a being who moved five hundred times as fast as you did?

## 7

He had a sudden sense of awe, a picture ... At any given instant Dzing was a blur. A spot of light. A movement so rapid that, even as the gaze lighted on him, he was gone to the other end of the ship--and back.

Yet Lesbee knew it took time to traverse the great ship from end to end. Twenty, even twenty-five minutes, was normal walking time for a human being going along the corridor known as Center A.

It would take the Karn a full six seconds there and back. In its way that was a significant span of time, but after Lesbee had considered it for a moment he felt appalled.

What could they do against a creature who had so great a time differential in his favor?

From behind him, Browne said, "Why don't you use against him that remote landing control system that you set up with my permission?"

Lesbee confessed: "I did that, as soon as the acceleration ceased. But he must have been--back--in the faster time by then."

"That wouldn't make any difference," said Browne.

"Eh!" Lesbee was startled.

Browne parted his lips evidently intending to explain, and then he closed them again. Finally he said, "Make sure the intercom is off."

Lesbee did so. But he was realizing that Browne was up to something again. He said, and there was rage in his tone, "I don't get it, and you do. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Browne. He spoke deliberately, but he was visibly suppressing excitement. "I know how to defeat this creature. That puts me in a bargaining position."

Lesbee's eyes were narrowed to slits. "Damn you, no bargain. Tell me, or else!"

Browne said, "I'm not really trying to be difficult. You either have to kill me, or come to some agreement. I want to know what that agreement is, because of course I'll do it."

Lesbee said, "I think we ought to have an election."

"I agree!" Browne spoke instantly. "You set it up." He broke off. "And now release me from these tractors and I'll show you the neatest space-time trick you've ever seen, and that'll be the end of Dzing."

Lesbee gazed at the man's face, saw there the same open-ness of countenance, the same frank

honesty that had pre-ceded the execution order, and he thought, "What can he do?"

He considered many possibilities, and thought finally, desperately: "He's got the advantage over me of superior knowledge--the most undefeatable weapon in the world. The only thing I can really hope to use against it in the final issue is *my* knowledge of a multitude of technician-level details."

But--what could Browne do against Lesbee?

He said unhappily to the other, "Before I free you, I want to lift you over to Mindel. When I do, you get his blaster for me.

"Sure," said Browne casually.

A few moments later he handed Mindel's gun over to Lesbee. So that wasn't it.

Lesbee thought: "There's Miller on the bridge--can it be that Miller flashed him a ready signal when my back was turned to the board?"

Perhaps, like Browne, Miller had been temporarily in-capacitated during the period of acceleration. It was vital that he find out Miller's present capability.

Lesbee tripped the intercom between the two boards. The rugged, lined face of the first officer showed large on the screen. Lesbee could see the outlines of the bridge behind the man and, beyond, the starry blackness of space. Lesbee said courteously, "Mr. Miller, how did you make out during the acceleration?"

"It caught me by surprise, Captain. I really got a battering. I think I was out for a while. But I'm all right now."

"Good," said Lesbee. "As you probably heard, Captain Browne and I have come to an agreement, and we are now going to destroy the creature that is loose on the ship. Standby!"

Cynically, he broke the connection.

Miller was there all right, waiting. But the question was still, what could Miller do? The answer of course was that Miller could pre-empt. And--Lesbee asked himself--what could *that* do?

Abruptly, it seemed to him, he had the answer.

It was the technician's answer that he had been mentally straining for.

He now understood Browne's plan. They were waiting for Lesbee to let down his guard for a moment. Then Miller would pre-empt, cut off the tractor beam from Browne and seize Lesbee with it.

For the two officers it was vital that Lesbee not have time to fire the blaster at Browne. Lesbee thought: "It's the only thing they can be worried about. The truth is, there's nothing else to stop them."

The solution was, Lesbee realized with a savage glee, to let the two men achieve their desire. But first--

"Mr. Browne," he said quietly, "I think you should give your information. If I agree that it is indeed the correct solution, I shall release you and we shall have an election. You and I will stay right here till the election is over."

Browne said, "I accept your promise. The speed of light is a constant, and does not change in relation to moving objects. That would also apply to electromagnetic fields."

Lesbee said, "Then Dzing was affected by the remote-control device I turned on."

"Instantly," said Browne. "He never got a chance to do anything. How much power did you use?"

"Only first stage," said Lesbee. "But the machine-driven thought pulses in that would interfere with just about every magnetic field in his body. He couldn't do another coherent thing."

Browne said in a hushed tone, "It's got to be. He'll be out of control in one of the corridors, completely at our mercy." He grinned. "I told you I knew how to defeat him--because, of course, he was already defeated."

Lesbee considered that for a long moment, eyes narrowed. He realized that he accepted the explanation, but that he had preparations to make, and quickly--before Browne got suspicious of his delay.

He turned to the board and switched on the intercom. "People," he said, "strap yourselves in again. Help those who were injured to do the same. We may have another emergency. You have several minutes, I think, but don't waste any of them."

He cut off the intercom, and he activated the closed-circuit intercom of the technical stations. He said urgently, "Special instruction to Technical personnel. Report anything unusual, particularly if strange thought forms are going through your mind."

He had an answer to that within moments after he finished speaking. A man's twangy voice came over: "I keep thinking I'm somebody named Dzing, and I'm trying to report to my owners. Boy, am I incoherent!"

"Where is this?"

"D--4--19."

Lesbee punched the buttons that gave them a TV view of that particular ship location. Almost immediately he spotted a shimmer near the floor.

After a moment's survey he ordered a heavy-duty mobile blaster brought to the corridor. By the time its colossal energies ceased, Dzing was only a darkened area on the flat surface.

While these events were progressing, Lesbee had kept one eye on Browne and Mindel's blaster firmly gripped in his left hand. Now he said, "Well, sir, you certainly did what you promised. Wait a moment while I put this gun away, and then I'll carry out my part of the bargain."

He started to do so, then, out of pity, paused.

He had been thinking in the back of his mind about what Browne had said earlier: that the trip to Earth might only take a few months. The officer had backed away from that statement, but it had been bothering Lesbee ever since.

If it were true, then it was indeed a fact that nobody need die!

He said quickly, "What was your reason for saying that the journey home would only take--well--less than a year?"

"It's the tremendous time compression," Browne explained eagerly. The distance as you pointed out is over 12 light-years. But with a time ratio of 3, 4 or 500 to one, we'll make it in less than a month. When I first started to say that, I could see that the figures were incomprehensible to you in your tense mood. In fact, I could scarcely believe them myself."

Lesbee said, staggered, "We can get back to Earth in a couple of weeks--my God!" He broke off, said urgently, "Look, I accept you as commander. We don't need an election. The status quo is good enough for any short period of time. Do you agree?"

"Of course," said Browne. "That's the point I've been trying to make."

As he spoke, his face was utterly guileless.

Lesbee gazed at that mask of innocence, and he thought hopelessly: "What's wrong? Why isn't he really agreeing? Is it because he doesn't want to lose his command so quickly?"

Sitting there, unhappily fighting for the other's life, he tried to place himself mentally in the position of the commander of a vessel, tried to look at the prospect of a return to view. It was hard to picture such a reality. But presently it seemed to him that he understood.

He said gently, feeling his way, "It would be kind of a shame to return without having made a successful landing anywhere. With this new speed, we could visit a dozen sun systems, and still get home in a year."

The look that came into Browne's face for a fleeting moment told Lesbee that he had penetrated to the thought in the man's mind.

The next instant, Browne was shaking his head vigorously. This is no time for side excursions," he said. "We'll leave explorations of new star systems to future expeditions. The people of this ship have served their term. We go straight home."

Browne's face was now completely relaxed. His blue eyes shone with truth and sincerity.

There was nothing further that Lesbee could say. The gulf between Browne and himself could not be bridged.

The commander had to kill his rival, so that he might finally return to Earth and report that the mission of the *Hope of Man* was accomplished.



In the most deliberate fashion Lesbee shoved the blaster into the inner pocket of his coat. Then, as if he were being careful, he used the tractor beam to push Browne about four feet away. There he set him down, released him from the beam, and--with the same deliberateness--drew his hand away from the tractor controls. Thus he made himself completely defenseless.

It was the moment of vulnerability.

Browne leaped at him, yelling: "Miller--pre-empt!"

First Officer Miller obeyed the command of his captain.

What happened then, only Lesbee, the technician with a thousand bits of detailed knowledge, expected.

For years it had been observed that when Control Room Below took over from Bridge, the ship speeded up slightly, and when Bridge took over from Control Room Below, the ship slowed instantly by the same amount--in each instance, something less than half a mile an hour.

The two boards were not completely synchronized. The technicians often joked about it, and Lesbee had once read an obscure technical explanation for the discrepancy. It had to do with the impossibility of ever getting two metals refined to the same precision of internal structure.

It was the age-old story of no two objects in the universe are alike. But in times past, the differential had meant nothing. It was a technical curiosity, an interesting phenomenon of the science of metallurgy, a practical problem that caused machinists to curse good-naturedly when technicians like Lesbee required them to make a replacement part.

Unfortunately for Browne, the ship was now traveling near the speed of light.

His strong hands, reaching towards Lesbee's slighter body, were actually touching the latter's arm when the momentary deceleration occurred as Bridge took over. The sudden slow-down was at a much faster rate than even Lesbee expected. The resistance of space to the forward movement of the ship must be using up more engine power than he had realized; it was taking a lot of thrust to maintain a one gravity acceleration.

The great vessel slowed about 150 miles per hour in the space of a second.

Lesbee took the blow of that deceleration partly against his back, partly against one side--for he had half-turned to defend himself from the bigger man's attack.

Browne, who had nothing to grab on to, was flung forward at the full 150 miles per hour. He struck the control board with an audible thud, stuck to it as if he were glued there; and then, when the adjustment was over--when the *Hope of Man* was again speeding along at one gravity--his body slid down the face of the board, and crumpled into a twisted position on the rubberized dais.

His uniform was discolored. As Lesbee watched, blood seeped through and dripped to the floor.

"Are you going to hold an election?" Tellier asked.

The big ship had turned back under Lesbee's command, and had picked up his friends. The lifeboat itself, with the remaining Karn still aboard, was put into an orbit around Alta III and abandoned.

The two young men were sitting now in the Captain's cabin.

After the question was asked, Lesbee leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. He didn't need to examine his total resistance to the suggestion. He had already savored the feeling that command brought.

Almost from the moment of Browne's death, he had observed himself having the same thoughts that Browne had voiced--among many others, the reasons why elections were not advisable aboard a spaceship. He waited now while Eleesa, one of his three wives--she being the younger of the two young widows of Browne--poured wine for them, and went softly out. Then he laughed grimly.

"My good friend," he said, "we're all lucky that time is so compressed at the speed of light. At 500-times compression, any further exploration we do will require only a few months, or years at most. And so I don't think we can afford to take the chance of defeating at an election the only person who understands the details of the new acceleration method. Until I decide exactly how much exploration we

shall do, I shall keep our speed capabilities a secret. But I did, and do, think one other person should know where I have this information documented. Naturally, I selected First Officer Tellier.”

“Thank you, sir,” the youth said. But he was visibly thoughtful as he sipped his wine. He went on finally, “Captain, I think you’d feel a lot better if you held an election. I’m sure you could win it.”

Lesbee laughed tolerantly, shook his head. “I’m afraid you don’t understand the dynamics of government,” he said. “There’s no record in history of a person who actually had control, handing it over.”

He finished with the casual confidence of absolute power. “I’m not going to be presumptuous enough to fight a precedent like that!”

## SILKIES IN SPACE

### *I*

NAT CEMP, walking along the street, passed the man--and stopped.

Something about the other triggered a signal in that portion of his nervous system which, even in his human state, retained a portion of his Silkie ability. He couldn’t remember, hard as he tried, ever having felt that particular signal before.

Cemp turned in the street and looked back. The stranger had paused at the near corner. Then, as the light became green, he walked briskly toward the far sidewalk. He was about Cemp’s height of slightly over six feet and seemed about the same build--about a hundred and ninety pounds.

His hair was dark brown, like Cemp’s, and he wore a dark gray suit, as did Cemp. Now that they were several hundred feet apart, the initial impression he had had of somebody familiar was not so clear.

Yet after only a slight hesitation, Cemp rapidly walked after the man, presently came up to him, and said courteously, “May I speak to you?”

The man stopped. At close range, the resemblance between them was truly remarkable, suggesting consanguinity. Blue-gray eyes, straight nose, firm mouth, strong neck, shape of ears, and the very way they held themselves were similar.

Cemp said, “I wonder if you are aware that you and I are practically twins.”

The man’s face twisted slightly. His lips curled into a faint sneer, and his eyes gazed scornfully at Cemp. He said in an exact replica of Cemp’s baritone voice, “It was my intent that you notice. If you hadn’t this first time, then I would have approached you again. My name is U-Brem.”

Cemp was silent, startled. He was surprised at the hostility in the stranger’s tone and manner. Contempt, he analyzed wonderingly.

Had the man been merely a human being who had some-how recognized a Silkie in human form, Cemp would have considered it one of those occasional incidents. Known Silkies were sometimes sought out by humans and insulted. Usually the human who committed such a foolish act could be evaded or good-naturedly parried or won over. But once in a while a Silkie had to fight. However, the man’s resemblance to Cemp indicated that this encounter was different.

As he had these thoughts, the stranger’s cynical gray-blue eyes were gazing into Cemp’s. The man’s lips parted in a derisive smile, showing even white teeth. “At approximately this moment,” he said, “every Silkie in the solar system is receiving a communication from his alter ego.”

He paused; again the insolent smile. “I can see that has alerted you, and you’re bracing yourself ...”

It was true. Cemp had abruptly decided that whether the other’s statement was true or not, he could not let him get away.

The man continued, “... bracing yourself to try to seize me. It can’t be done, for I match you in every way.”

“You’re a Silkie?” Cemp asked.

“I’m a Silkie.”

By all the logic of Silkie history, that had to be a false claim. And yet there was the unmistakable, sensational resemblance to himself.

But Cemp did not change his mind. Even if this was a Silkie, Cemp had a superiority over all other Silkies. In his struggle with the Kibmadine the year before, he had learned things about body control that were known to no other Silkie, since it had been decided by the Silkie Authority that he must not communicate to other Silkies the newly gained abilities. And he hadn’t.

That extra knowledge would now be to his advantage--if the other was indeed a Silkie.

“Ready for the message?” asked the man insolently.

Cemp, who was ready for the battle of his life, nodded curtly.

“It’s an ultimatum.”

“I’m waiting,” said Cemp.

“You are to cease and desist from your association with human beings. You are commanded to return to the nation of Silkies. You have a week to make up your mind. After that date you will be considered a traitor and will be treated as traitors have always been treated, without mercy.”

Since there was no “nation” of Silkies and never had been, Cemp, after considering the unexpected “ultimatum” for a moment, made his attack.

He still didn’t quite believe that his “twin” was a Silkie. So he launched a minimum electric charge on one of the magnetic bands that he could use as a human--enough to render unconsciousness but not damage.

To his dismay, a Silkie magnetic screen as powerful as anything he could muster warded off the energy blow. So the man was a Silkie.

The stranger stared at him, teeth showing, eyes glinting with sudden rage. “I’ll remember this!” he snarled. “You’d have hurt me if I hadn’t had a defense.”

Cemp hesitated, questioning his own purpose. It didn’t have to be capture. “Look,” he urged, “why don’t you come with me to the Silkie Authority? If there is a Silkie nation, normal communication is the best way of proving it.”

The strange Silkie began to back away. “I’ve done my duty,” he muttered. “I’m not accustomed to fighting. You tried to kill me.”

He seemed to be in a state of shock. His eyes had changed again, and they looked dazed now. All the man’s initial cocksureness was gone as he continued backing away.

Cemp followed, uncertain. He was himself a highly trained fighter; it was hard to grasp that here might be a Silkie who was actually not versed in battle.

He soothed, “We don’t have to fight. But you can’t expect to deliver an ultimatum and then go off into nowhere, as if you’ve done your part. You say your name is U-Brem. Where do you come from?”

He was aware, as he spoke, that people had stopped in the street and were watching the strange drama of two men, one retreating, the other pursuing, a slow step at a time.

“First, if there’s a Silkie nation, where has it--where have you--been biding all these years?” Cemp persisted.

“Damn you, stop badgering me. You’ve got your ulti-matum. You’ve got a week to think about it. Now leave me alone!”

The alter ego had clearly not considered what he would do after delivering his message. His unpreparedness made the whole incident even more fantastic. But he was showing anger again, recovering his nerve.

An electric discharge, in the jagged form of lightning, rode a magnetic beam of U-Brem’s creation and struck at Cemp, crackling against the magnetic screen he kept ready to be triggered into instant existence.

The lightning bolt bounced away from Cemp, caromed off a building, flashed across the sidewalk past several startled people, and grounded itself on the metal grill of a street drain.

“Two can play that game,” said U-Brem in a savage tone.

Cemp made no reply. The other's electric beam had been maximum for a Silkie in human form--death-level potency. Somewhere nearby, a woman screamed. The street was clearing. People were running away, seeking shelter.

The time had come to end this madness, or someone might be killed. Cemp acted on his evaluation that for some reason that was not clear, this Silkie was not properly trained and was therefore vulnerable to a nonlethal attack by a technique involving a simple version of levels of logic.

He wouldn't even have to use the secret ability he had learned from the Kibmadine the year before.

The moment he made up his mind, he did a subtle energy thing. He modified a specific set of low-energy force lines passing through his brain and going in the direction of U-Brem.

Instantly, there was manifested a strange logic implicit in the very structure and makeup of life. The logic of levels! The science that had been derived by human scientific methods from the great Silkie ability for changing form.

Each life cell had its own rigidity. Each gestalt of cells did a specific action, could do no other. Once stimulated, the "thought" in that particular nerve bundle went through its exact cycle, and if there was an accompanying motion or emotion, that also manifested itself precisely and exactly and without qualification.

Even more meaningful, more important--a number of cell colonies could be joined together to form a new gestalt, and groups of such clusters had *their* special action. One such colony gestalt was the sleep center in human beings.

The method Cemp used wouldn't work on a Silkie in his class-C form. Even a B Silkie could fight off sleep. But this Silkie in human form began to stagger. His eyes were sud-denly heavy lidded, and the uncontrolled appearance of his body showed that he was asleep on his feet.

As the man fell, Cemp stepped forward and caught his body, preventing an injurious crash to the concrete side-walk. Simultaneously, he did a second, subtle, thing. On another force line, he put a message that manipulated the unconsciousness gestalt in the other's brain. It was an attempt at complete control. Sleep cut off U-Brem's per-ception of his environment. Cemp's manipulation of his unconsciousness mechanism eliminated those messages from the brain's stored memory which would normally stimulate to wakefulness someone who was not really sleepy.

Cemp was congratulating himself on his surprisingly easy capture--when the body he held stiffened. Cemp, sensing an outside force, drew back. To his complete astonishment, the unconscious man rose straight up into the sky.

In his human form, Cemp was not able to determine the nature of the energy that could accomplish such an im-probable feat. He should he realized, transform to Silkie. He found himself hesitating. There was a rule against changing in full view of human beings. Abruptly, he recog-nized that this situation was unique, a never-before-encoun-tered emergency. He transformed to Silkie and cut off gravity.

The ten-foot body, shaped a little like a projectile, rose from the ground at missile speed. Most of his clothes, com-pletely torn away, fell to the ground. A few tattered remnants remained but were swept away by the gale winds created by his passage.

Unfortunately, all of five seconds had gone by while he made the transformation, and since several seconds had already passed before he acted, he found himself pursuing a speck that was continuing to go straight up.

What amazed him anew was that even with his Silkie perception, he could detect no energy from it, below it, or around it. Yet its speed was as great as anything he could manage. Accordingly, after only moments, he realized that his pursuit was not swift enough to overtake the man and that the body of U-Brem would reach an atmosphere height too rarefied for human survival unless he acted promptly. He therefore mercifully removed the pressure from the sleep and unconsciousness center of the other's body.

Moments later, he was disappointed, but not surprised, he sensed from the other a shift to Silkie form; proof that he had awakened and could now be responsible for himself.

U-Brem continued straight up, as a full-grown Silkie now, and it was presently obvious that he intended to risk going through the Van Allen belt. Cemp had no such fool-hardy purpose.

As the two of them approached the outer limits of the atmosphere, Cemp put a thought on a beam to a

manned Telstar unit in orbit around Earth. The thought contained simply the data about what had happened.

The message sent, he turned back. Greatly disturbed by his experience--and being without clothes for human wear--he flew straight to the Silkie Authority.

## 2

Cemp, descending from the sky down to the vast building complex that comprised the central administration for dealing with Silkies, saw that other Silkies were also coming in. He presumed, grimly, that they were there for the same reason as he was.

As the realization came, he scanned the heavens behind him with his Silkie senses and perceived that scores more of black spots were out there, hurtling closer. Divining imminent confusion, he slowed and stopped. Then, from his position in the sky, he telepathed Charley Baxter, proposing a special plan to handle the emergency.

Baxter was in a distracted state, but presently his return thought came. "Nat, yours is just about the best idea we've had. And you're right. This could be dangerous."

There was a pause. Baxter must have got his message through to other of the Special People, for Cemp began to record a general Silkie warning. "To all Silkies: It would be unwise for too many of you to concentrate at one time in one place. So divide into ten groups on the secret-number system, plan G. Group One only, approach and land. All others disperse until called."

In the sky near Cemp, Silkies began to mill around. Cemp, who, by the designated number system, was in group three, veered off, climbed to the upper atmosphere, and darted a thousand miles over, to his home in Florida.

En route, he talked mentally to his wife, Joanne. And so by the time he walked naked into the house, she had clothes laid out for him and knew as much as he about what had happened.

As Cemp dressed, he saw that she was in a womanly state of alarm, more concerned than he. She accepted that there was a Silkie nation and that this meant there would also be Silkie women.

"Admit it!" she said tearfully. "That thought has already crossed your mind, hasn't it?"

"I'm a logical person," Cemp defended. "So I've had fleet-ing thoughts about all possibilities. But being sensible, I feel that a lot of things have to be explained before I can reject what we know of Silkie history. And so until we have proof of something different, I shall go on believing that Silkies are the result of biological experiments with DNA and DNP and that old Sawyer did it there on Echo Island."

"What's going to become of our marriage?" Joanne said in an anguished voice.

"Nothing will change."

She sobbed. "I'm going to seem to you like a native woman of three hundred years ago who is married to a white man on a South Sea Island--and then white women begin arriving on the island."

The wildness of her fantasizing astounded Cemp. "It's not the same," he said. "I promise complete loyalty and devotion for the rest of our lives."

"Nobody can promise anything in personal relations," she said. But his words seemed to reassure her after a moment. She dried her eyes and came over to him and allowed herself to be kissed.

It was an hour before a phone call came from Charley Baxter. The man was apologetic for the delay but explained that it was the result of a conference on Cemp's future actions.

"It was a discussion just about you in all this," Baxter said.

Cemp waited.

The final decision was to continue to not let Cemp intermingle with, other Silkies--"for reasons that you know," Baxter said significantly.

Cemp surmised that the reference was to the secret knowledge he had gained from the Kibmadine Di-isarinn and that this meant they would continue to send him on special missions that kept him away from other Silkies.

Baxter now produced the information that only four hundred Silkies had been approached by alter egos. "The number actually reported in," he said, "is three hundred and ninety-six."

Cemp was vaguely relieved, vaguely contemptuous. U-Brem's claim that all Silkies were targets was now proved to be propaganda. He had already shown himself to be an inept Silkie. The lie added one more degrading touch.

"Some of them were pretty poor duplicates," said Baxter. "Apparently, mimicking another body is not a great skill with them."

However, he admitted, even four hundred was more than enough to establish the existence of a hitherto unknown group of Silkies.

"Even if they are untrained," he said, "we've absolutely got to find out who they are and where they come from."

"Is there no clue?" Cemp asked.

No more than he already knew.

"They all got away?" Cemp said, astounded. "No one did any better than I did?"

"On the average, not as well," said Baxter.

It seemed that most Silkies had made no effort to hold the strange Silkies who confronted them; they had simply reported in and asked for instructions.

"Can't blame them," said Baxter.

He continued, "But I might as well tell you that your fight and your reasons for fighting make you one of the two dozen Silkies we feel we can depend on in this matter. So here are your instructions ..."

He talked for several minutes and concluded, "Take Joanne with you, but go at once!"

The sign said, ALL THE MUSIC IN THIS BUILDING IS SILKIE MUSIC.

Cemp, who had never listened for long to any other kind, saw the faint distaste come into his wife's face. She caught his look and evidently his thought, for she said, "All right, so it sounds dead level to me, as if it's all the same note--well, anyway, the same few notes, close together, repeated in various sickening combinations."

She stopped, shook her beautiful blonde head, and said, "I guess I'm tense and afraid and need something wild and clashy."

To Cemp, who could hear harmonies in the music that were beyond the reach of ordinary human ears, her outburst was but a part of the severe emotional reactions to things that Silkies married to human women had to become accustomed to. The wives of Silkies had a hard time making their peace with the realities of the relationship.

As Joanne had put it more than once, "There you are with this physically perfect, beautiful male. But all the time you're thinking, "This is not really a man. It's a monster that can change in a flash into either a fishlike being or a creature of space. But of course, I wouldn't part with him for any-thing."

The music sign was soon behind them, and they walked on into the interior of the museum. Their destination was the original laboratory, in which the first Silkie was supposed to have been produced. The lab occupied the center of the building; it had been moved there from the West Indies a hundred and ten years before, according to a date on a wall plaque at the entrance.

It had seemed to Baxter that a sharper study should be made of the artifacts of Silkie history. The entire structure of that history was now being questioned for the very first time.

This task, of reevaluating the past data, had been assigned to Cemp and Joanne.

The lab was brightly lighted. It had only one visitor; a rather plain young woman with jet-black hair but no makeup, wearing ill-fitting clothes, was standing at one of the tables beside the far doorway.

As Cemp came in, a thought not his own touched his mind. He started to turn to Joanne, taking it for granted that she had communicated with him on that level. He took it for granted, that is, for several seconds.

Belatedly, realization came that the thought had arrived on a magnetic carrier wave--Silkie level.

Cemp swung around and stared at the black-haired woman. She smiled at him, somewhat tensely, he noted, and then her thought came, unmistakably: "Please don't give me away. I was stationed here to convince any doubting Silkie."

She didn't have to explain what she meant. The thunder of it was pouring through Cemp's mind.

According to his knowledge, there had never been any female Silkies. All Silkies on Earth were males, married to women of the Special People--like Joanne.

But this black-haired, farm-woman type was a female Silkie! That was what she was letting him know by her presence. In effect, by being here, she was saying, "Don't bother to search dusty old files. I'm living proof that Silkies were not produced in somebody's laboratory two hundred and thirty years ago."

Suddenly Cemp was confused. He was aware that Joanne had come up beside him, that she must have caught his thought, that she was herself dismayed. The one glimpse he had of her face showed that she had become very pale.

"Nat!" her voice came sharply. "You've got to capture her!"

Cemp started forward, but it was a half-hearted move-ment. Yet in spite of the uncertainty in his actions, he was already having logical thoughts.

Since only hours had gone by since the moment he first saw U-Brem, she must have been stationed here in advance. She would therefore have had no contact with the others. And so she wouldn't know that to a trained Silkie like him-self, she was as vulnerable as an unarmed civilian opposed by a soldier.

The black-haired woman must have suddenly had some doubt of her own. Abruptly she stepped through the door near which she had been-standing and closed it after her.

"Nat!" Joanne's voice, high-pitched, sounded mere inches behind him. "You can't let her get away!"

Cemp, who had emerged from his brief stasis, projected a thought after the female Silkie. "I'm not going to fight you, but I'm going to stay close to you until I have all the infor-mation we want."

"Too late!" A magnetic carrier wave, human-Silkie level, brought her thought. "You're already too late."

Cemp didn't think so. He arrived at the door through which she had disappeared, was slightly disconcerted to find that it was locked, smashed it with a single jagged lightning thrust of electrical force, stepped through its smoking remains--and saw the woman in the act of entering a gap in the wall made by a sliding door.

She was not more than three dozen feet away, and she had half-turned to look back in his direction. What she saw was evidently a surprise, for a startled look came into her face.

Hastily, her hand came up to something inside the aper-ture, and the door slid shut. As it closed, Cemp, who was running toward it, had a glimpse of a gleaming corridor beyond. The existence of such a secret passageway had too many implications for Cemp to consider immediately.

He was at the wall, fumbling for the hidden door. When he could not find it after several long moments, he stepped back and burned it down with the two energy flows from his brain, which, when they came together outside his body, created an intense electrical arc. It was the only energy weapon available to him as a human being, but it was enough.

A minute later, he stepped through the smoking opening into a narrow corridor.

### 3

The corridor in which Cemp found himself was made of concrete and slanted gently downward. It was dimly lighted and straight, and he could see the young woman in the near distance ahead--about two hundred feet away.

She was running, but as a woman wearing a dress runs--not very fast. Cemp broke into his own high-speed lope and in a minute had cut the distance between them in half. Abruptly, the concrete ended. Ahead was a dirt cave, still lighted, but the lights were set farther apart.

As she reached this point, the young woman sent him a message on a magnetic force line. "If you don't stop chasing me, I'll have to use the (something not clear to Cemp) power."

Cemp remembered the energy that had lifted U-Brem into the sky. He took the threat seriously and instantly modified a magnetic wave to render her unconscious.

It was not so cruel an act as it would have been earlier. Now she fell like a stone--which was the unfortunate characteristic of the unconsciousness gestalt--but she fell on dirt and not on cement. The motion of her body was such that she pitched forward on her knees, then slid down on her right shoulder.

It didn't look too severe for her--so it seemed to Cemp as he came closer to where she was lying.

He had slowed to a walk. Now, still wary, he approached the prostrate body, determined not to let any special "power" remove her from him. He felt only slightly guilty at the violent method he had used. His reasoning had permitted no less control over her. The "sleep" shut-off on U-Brem had not prevented that individual from turning on the force field--so Cemp considered it to be--that had saved him. Quite simply, he couldn't let her get away.

Because it was an untried situation, he acted at once. At this moment, he had her; there were too many unknowns for him to risk any delay. He knelt beside her. Since she was unconscious and not asleep, her sensory system was open to exterior stimulation. But for her to answer, she would have to be switched to sleep, so that the shut-off interior perception could flow.

So he sat there, alternately manipulating her unconsciousness center, when he wanted to ask a question, and her sleep center, for her reply. It was like ancient ham radio with each party saying "over" when his message was completed.

And of course, in addition, he had to make sure that she did reply to his queries. So he asked one question after another, and with each question he modified a magnetic wave with a message to the brain-cell gestalt that responded to hypnotic drugs. The result was a steady mental conversation.

"What is your name?"

"B-Roth."

"Where do you come from?"

"From home."

"Where is home?"

"In the sky." A mental image came of a small stone body in space; Cemp's impression was of a meteorite less than twenty miles in diameter. "About to go around the sun, inside the first planet's orbit."

So she *had* come to Earth in advance. So they *were* all far from "home" and had apparently had no preliminary knowledge that they were outskilled by Earth Silkies. As a result, he was now obtaining this decisive information.

"What is its orbit?" Cemp asked.

"It goes as far out as the eighth planet."

Neptune! What a tremendous distance--nearly thirty astronomical units.

Cemp asked quickly, "What is its mean speed?"

Her answer was in terms of Mercury's year. Converted to Earth time, it came to a hundred and ten years per orbit.

Cemp whistled softly. An immediate association had leaped into his mind. The first Silkie baby had been born to Marie Ederle slightly more than two hundred and twenty years before, according to the official history. The time involved was approximately twice as long as the orbital period of the little Silkie planetoid.

Cemp ended that train of speculation abruptly and demanded from B-Roth exactly how she would again find the planetoid, which surely must be one of thousands of similar bodies.

The answer was one that only a Silkie could operate from. She had in her brain a set of relationships and signal-recognition images that identified for her the location of the Silkie home.

Cemp made an exact mental copy of these images. He was about to begin questioning her for details on other matters--when an inertia phenomenon effected his body.

He was flung backward. ... It was as if he were in a vehicle, his back to the forward motion, and the vehicle stopped suddenly, but he went on.

Because he always had protection against sudden falls, he had been moved less than eight feet before he triggered his magnetic field, his only screening mechanism as a human.

The field he set up could not stop the pull of gravity directly, but it derived from the Earth's magnetic force and gained its power from the force lines that passed through this exact space.

As Cemp modulated the lines now, they attached themselves to flexible metal bands that were woven into his clothes, and they held him. He hung there a few feet above the floor. From this vantage point he was able to examine his situation.



At once, the phenomenon was shown as completely fantastic. He detected in the heart of the gravity field a tiny molecule complex. What was fantastic about it was this: Gravity was an invariable, solely dependent on mass and square of distance. Cemp had already calculated the gravity pull on him to be the equivalent of three times that of Earth at sea level. And so, by all the laws of physics, that incredibly small particle must have an equivalent mass to three Earths!

Impossible, of course.

It was by no means a complex of one of the large molecules, as far as Cemp could determine, and it was not radio-active.

He was about to abandon his study of it and to turn his attention to his own situation, when he noticed that the gravity field had an even more improbable quality. Its pull was limited to organic matter. It had no effect on the surrounding dirt walls, and in fact--his mind poised in a final amazement--the woman's body was not influenced by it.

The gravity was limited to one particular organic configuration--himself! One body, one human being only--Nat Cemp--was the sole object toward which it was oriented.

He found himself remembering how he had been un-touched by the field that had lifted U-Brem. He had sensed the presence of a field but only by the way the magnetic lines that passed through his head were affected by it. Even in his Silkie form, as he pursued the hurtling body of his alter ego, that, and merely that, had been true.

This was for him a personal gravitational field, a small group of molecules that "knew" him.

As these flashing awarenesses came to him, Cemp turned his head and gazed back at the young woman. He was not surprised at what he saw. His attention had been forcibly removed from her, so the pressure on the unconsciousness valve in her brain was released. She was stirring, coming to.

She sat up, looked around, and saw him.

She came to her feet quickly, with an athletic ease. She evidently did not remember what had happened while she was unconscious, did not realize how completely she had given away basic secrets, for her face broke into a smile.

"You see?" she said. "I told you what would happen. Well, goodbye."

Her spirits visibly high, she turned, walked off into the cave, and presently disappeared as it gradually curved off to the left.

After she was gone, Cemp turned his attention back to the gravity field. He assumed that it would eventually be with-drawn or fade out, and he would be free. He had the distinct conviction that he might have only minutes in which to examine it and discover its nature.

He thought unhappily, *If I could change into my Silkie form, I could really examine it.*

But he dared not, could not. At least, he couldn't do it and simultaneously maintain his safe position.

Silkies had one weakness, if it could be called that. They were vulnerable when they changed from one form to another. Considering this, Cemp now conducted his first mental conversation with Joanne. He explained his predicament, described what he had learned, and ended, "I think I can stay here all day and see what comes of this, but I should probably have another Silkie stand by for emergencies."

Her anxious reply was, "I'll have Charley Baxter contact you."

#### 4

She phoned Baxter and passed the conversation on to Cemp in thought form.

Baxter was enormously excited by the information that Cemp had obtained about the alien Silkies. He regarded the gravity field as a new energy application, but he was reluctant to send in another Silkie.

"Let's face it, Joanne," he said. "Your husband learned something last year which, if other Silkies understood it, might wreck the delicate balance by which we are maintaining our present Silkie-human civilization. Nat understands our concern about that. So tell him I'll send a machine in there to act as a barrier for him while he makes his change-over into Silkie."

It occurred to Cemp that the appearance of new, hitherto unknown Silkies would alter the Silkie-human relationship even more. But he did not permit that thought to go out to Joanne.

Baxter's conversation concluded with the statement that it would probably take a while before the machine could be got to him. "So tell him to hold on."

After Baxter had hung up, Joanne thought at Cemp, "I should tell you that I am relieved about one thing."

"What's that?"

"If the Silkie women are all as plain in human form as B-Roth, then I'm not going to worry."

An hour went by. Two ... ten.

In the world outside, the skies would be dark, the sun long gone, the stars signaling in their tiny brilliant fashion.

Charley Baxter's machine had come and gone, and Cemp, safe in the Silkie form, remained close to the most remarkable energy field that had ever been seen in the solar system. What was astounding was that it showed no diminution of its colossal gravity effect. His hope had been that with his supersensitive Silkie perception he would be able to perceive any feeder lines that might be flowing power to it from an outside source. But there was nothing like that; nothing to trace. The power came from the single small group of molecules. It had no other origin.

The minutes and the hours lengthened. The watch became long, and he had time to feel the emotional impact of the problem that now confronted every Silkie on Earth--the need to make a decision about the Space Silkies.

Morning.

Shortly after the sun came up outside, the field manifested an independent quality. It began to move along the corridor, heading deeper into the cave. Cemp floated along after it, letting a portion of its gravitational pull draw him. He was wary but curious, hopeful that now he would find out more.

The cave ended abruptly in a deep sewer, which had the look of long abandonment. The concrete was cracked, and there were innumerable deep fissures in the walls. But to the group of molecules and their field, it seemed to be a familiar area, for they went forward more rapidly. Suddenly, there was water below them. It was not stagnant, but rippled and swirled. A tidal pool, Cemp analyzed.

The water grew deeper, and presently they were in it, traveling at undiminished speed. Ahead, the murky depths grew less murky. They emerged into sunlit waters in a canyon about a hundred feet below the surface of the ocean.

As they broke surface a moment later, the strange energy complex accelerated. Cemp, suspecting that it would now try to get away from him, made a final effort to perceive its characteristics.

But nothing came back to him. No message, no sign of energy flow. For a split second, he did have the impression that the atoms making up the molecule group were some-how ... not right. But when he switched his attention to the band involved, either the molecules became aware of his momentary awareness and closed themselves off or he imagined it.

Even as he made the analysis, his feeling that he was about to be discarded was borne out. The particle's speed increased rapidly. In seconds, its velocity approached the limits of what he could permit himself to endure inside an atmosphere. The outer chitin of his Silkie body grew hot, then hotter.

Reluctantly, Cemp adjusted his own atomic structure, so that the gravity of the alien field no longer affected him. As he fell away, it continued to pursue a course that took an easterly direction, where the sun was now about an hour above the horizon. Within mere seconds of his separation from it, it left the atmosphere and, traveling at many miles a second, headed seemingly straight for the sun.

Cemp came to the atmosphere's edge. "Gazing" by means of his Silkie perceptors out upon the vast, dark ocean of space beyond, he contacted the nearest Telstar unit. To the scientists aboard, he gave a fix on the speeding molecule group. Then he waited hopefully while they tried to put a tracer on it.

But the word finally came, "Sorry, we get no reaction."

Baffled, Cemp let himself be drawn by Earth's gravity. Then, by a series of controlled adjustments to the magnetic and gravity fields of the planet, he guided himself to the Silkie Authority.

Three hours of talk ...

Cemp, who, as the only Silkie present, occupied a seat near the foot of the long table, found the discussion boring.

It had early seemed to him that he or some other Silkie ought to be sent to the Silkie planetoid to learn the facts, handle the matter in a strictly logical but humanitarian fashion, and report back to the Authority.

If, for some reason, the so-called Silkie nation proved unamenable to reason, then a further discussion would be in order.

As he waited for the three dozen human conferees to reach the same decision, he couldn't help but notice the order of importance at the table.

The Special People, including Charley Baxter, were at the head of the long table. Next, ranging down on either side, were the ordinary human beings. Then, on one side, himself, and below him, three minor aides and the official secretary of the three-man Silkie Authority.

It was not a new observation for him. He had discussed it with other Silkies, and it had been pointed out to him that here was a reversal of the power role that was new in history. The strongest individuals in the solar system--the Silkies were still relegated to secondary status.

He emerged from his reverie to realize that silence had fallen. Charley Baxter, slim, gray-eyed, intense, was coming around the long table. He stopped across from Cemp.

"Well, Nat," said Baxter, "there's the picture as we see it." He seemed embarrassed.

Cemp did a lightning mental backtrack on the discussion and realized that they had indeed arrived at the inevitable conclusion. But he noted also that they considered it a weighty decision. It was a lot to ask of any person, that was the attitude. The result could be personal disaster. They wouldn't be critical if he refused.

"I feel ashamed to ask it," said Baxter, "but this is almost a war situation."

Cemp could see that they were not sure of themselves. There had been no war on Earth for a hundred and fifty years. No one was an expert in it any more.

He climbed to his feet as these awarenesses touched him. Now he looked around at the faces turned to him and said, "Calm yourselves, gentlemen. Naturally I'll do it."

They all looked relieved. The discussion turned quickly to details--the difficulty of locating a single meteorite in space, particularly one that had such a long sidereal period.

It was well known that there were about fifteen hundred large meteorites and planetoids and tens of thousands of smaller objects orbiting the sun. All these had orbits or motions that, though subject to the laws of celestial mechanics, were often very eccentric. A few of them, like comets, periodically came in close to the sun, then shot off into space again, returning for another hectic go-round fifty to a hundred years later. There were so many of these inter-mediate-sized rocks that they were identified and their courses plotted only for special reasons. There had simply never been any point in tracking them all.

Cemp had matched course with and landed on scores of lone meteorites. His recollections of those experiences were among the bleaker memories of his numerous space flights--the darkness, the sense of utterly barren rock, the profound lack of sensory stimulation. Oddly, the larger they were, the worse the feeling was.

He had discovered that he could have a kind of intellectual affinity with a rock less than a thousand feet in diameter. This was particularly true when he encountered an in-articulate mass that had finally been precipitated into a hyperbolic orbit. When he computed that it was thus destined to leave the solar system forever, he would find himself imagining how long it had been in space, how far it had gone, and how it would now hurtle away from the solar system and spend eons between the stars, and he could not help feeling a sense of loss.

A government representative--a human being named John Mathews--interrupted his thought. "Mr. Cemp, I'd like to ask you a very personal question."

Cemp looked at him and nodded.

The man went on, "According to reports, several hundred Earth Silkies have already defected to these native Silkies. Evidently, you don't feel as they do, that the Silkie planetoid is home. Why not?"

Cemp smiled. "Well, first of all," he said, "I would never buy a pig in a poke the way they have done."

He hesitated. Then, in a serious tone, he continued. "Entirely apart from my feelings of loyalty to Earth, I do not believe the future of life forms will be helped or advanced by any rigid adherence to the idea that I am a lion, or I am a bear. Intelligent life is, or should be, moving toward a common civilization. Maybe I'm like the farm boy who went to the city--Earth. Now my folks want me to come back to the farm. They'll never understand why I can't, so I don't even try to explain it to them."

"Maybe," said Mathews, "the planetoid is actually the big city and Earth the farm. What then?"

Cemp smiled politely but merely shook his head.

Mathews persisted, "One more question. How should Silkies be treated?"

Cemp spread his hands. "I can't think of a single change that would be of value."

He meant it. He had never been able to get excited about the pecking order. Yet he had known for a long time that some Silkies felt strongly about their inferior--as it seemed to them--role. Others, like himself, did their duty, were faithful to their human wives, and tried to enjoy the some-what limited possibilities of human civilization--limited for Silkies, who had so many additional senses for which there was no real creative stimulation.

Presumably, things could be better. But meanwhile, they were what they were. Cemp recognized that any attempt to alter them would cause fear and disturbance among human beings. And why do that merely to satisfy the egos of some-what fewer than two thousand Silkies?

At least, that had been the problem until now. The coming of the space Silkies would add an indefinite number of new egos to the scene, yet, Cemp reasoned, not enough to change the statistics meaningfully.

Aloud, he said, "As far as I can see, under all conceivable circumstances, there is no better solution to the Silkie problem than that which exists right now."

Charley Baxter chose that moment to end the discussion, saying, "Nat, you have our best, our very best, wishes. And our complete confidence. A spaceship will rush you to Mercury's orbit and give you a head start. Good luck."

## 6

The scene ahead was absolutely fantastic.

The Silkie planetoid would make its circuit of the sun far inside Mercury's eccentric orbit, and the appearance was that it might brush the edges of the great clouds of hot gas that seemed to poke out like streamers or shapeless arms from the sun's hot surface.

Cemp doubted if such a calamity would actually occur, but as he periodically subjected his steel-hard chitinous Silkie body to the sun's gravity, he sensed the enormous pull of it at this near distance. The circle of white fire filled almost the entire sky ahead. The light was so intense and came in on him on so many bands that it overwhelmed his receptor system whenever he let it in. And he had to open up at intervals in order to make readjustments in his course.

The two hurtling bodies--his own and that of the planet-oid--were presently on a collision course. The actual moment of "collision" was still hours away. So Cemp shut off his entire perception system. Thus, instantly, he sank into the deep sleep that Silkies so rarely allowed themselves.

He awoke in stages and saw that his timing had been exact. The planetoid was now "visible" on one of the tiny neural screens inside the forward part of his body. It showed as a radar-type image, and at the beginning it was the size of a pea.

In less than thirty minutes it grew to an apparent size of five miles, which was half its diameter, he estimated.

At this point, Cemp performed his only dangerous maneuver. He allowed the sun's gravity, to draw him be-tween the sun and the planetoid. Then he cut off the sun's gravity and, using a few bursts of energy manufactured at the edge of a field behind his body, darted toward the planetoid's surface.

What was dangerous about this action was that it brought him in on the dayside. With the superbrilliant

sunlight behind him, he was clearly visible to anyone in or on or around the planetoid. But his theory was that no Silkie would normally be exposing himself to the sun, that in fact, every sensible Silkie would be inside the big stone ball or on its night side.

At close range in that ultrabright light, the planetoid looked like the wrinkled head and face of a bald old Amerind. It was reddish-gray and pock marked and lined and not quite round. The pock marks turned out to be actual caves. Into one of these, Cemp floated. He went down into what to human eyes would have been pitch darkness, but the interior was visible to him as a Silkie on many bands.

He found himself in a corridor with smooth granite walls that led slantingly downward. After about twenty minutes he came to a turn in the passageway. As he rounded it, he saw a shimmering, almost opaque energy screen in front of him.

Cemp decided at once not to regard it as a problem. He doubted if it had been put up to catch anyone. In fact, his lightning analysis of it indicated that it was a wall, with the equivalent solidity of a large spaceship's outer skin.

As a screen it was strong enough to keep out the most massive armor-piercing shells. Going through such a screen was an exercise in Silkie energy control. First, he put up a matching field and started it oscillating. The oscillation un-stabilized the opposing screen and started it in a sympathetic vibration. As the process continued, the screen and the field began to merge. But it was the screen that became part of Cemp's field, not the reverse.

Thus, his field was within minutes a part of the barrier. Safely inside his field, he crossed the barrier space. Once past it, disengagement was a matter of slowing down the oscillation until the field and the screen abruptly became separate entities.

The sound of the separation was like the crack of a whip, and the presence of sound indicated he had come into air space. Quickly, he discovered that it was air of an unearthly mixture--thirty percent oxygen, twenty percent helium, and most of the rest gaseous sulphur compounds.

The pressure was about twice that of sea level on Earth, but it was air, and it undoubtedly had a purpose.

From where he had floated through the energy barrier, he saw a large chamber the floor of which was about a hundred feet below him.

Soft lights shone down. Seen in their light, the room was a jewel. The walls were inlaid with precious stones, fine metals, and vari-colored rock cunningly cut into a design. The design was a continuing story picture of a race of four-legged centaur-type beings with a proud bearing and--wherever there were close-ups--sensitive though nonhuman faces.

On the floor was a picture of a planet inset in some kind of glowing substance that showed the curving, mountainous surface, with sparkling lines where rivers flowed, likenesses of forests and other growth, glinting oceans and lakes, and thousands of bright spots marking cities and towns.

The sides of the planet curved away in proper proportion, and Cemp had the feeling that the globe continued on down and that the bottom was probably visible in some lower room.

The overall effect was completely and totally *beautiful*.

Cemp surmised that the life scenes and the planet picture were an accurate eidolon of a race and a place with which the Silkies had at some time in their past been associated.

He was mentally staggered by the artistic perfection of the room.

He had already, as he floated down, noticed that there were large archways leading to adjoining chambers. He had glimpses of furniture, machines, objects, shining bright and new. He surmised they were artifacts of either the centaur or other civilizations. But he could not take time to explore. His attention fastened on a stairway that led down to the next level.

He went down it and presently found himself facing an-other energy barrier. Penetrating it exactly as he had the other, he moved on and into a chamber filled with sea water. Inset in the floor of that huge room was a planet that glimmered with the green-blue of an under-sea civilization.

And that was only the beginning. Cemp went down from one level to another, each time through an energy screen and through a similarly decorated chamber. Each was inlaid in the same way with precious stones and glinting metals. Each had breathtaking scenes from what he presumed were habitable planets

of far stars, and each had a different atmosphere.

After a dozen such chambers, Cemp found that the impact was cumulative. Realization came to him that here, inside this planetoid, had been gathered such treasure as probably did not exist anywhere else. Cemp visualized the seven-hundred-odd cubic miles that comprised the interior of the most fantastic asteroid in the galaxy, and he remembered what Mathews had said--that perhaps the planetoid was the "city" and Earth was the "farm".

It began to seem that the man's speculation might be truth.

He had been expecting to collide momentarily with an inhabitant of the planetoid. After passing three more chambers, each with its glowing duplicate in miniature of a planet of long ago and far away, Cemp paused and recon-sidered.

He had a strong feeling that in learning of these treasures, he had gained an advantage--which he must not lose--and that the Silkies did indeed have their living quarters on the side away from the sun and that they did not expect anyone to arrive in this surprise fashion.

The idea continued to seem correct, and so he turned back and was presently dropping directly toward the dark side. Again the cave openings and, a few score feet inside, the energy barrier. Beyond that were air and gravitation exactly like those at sea level on Earth.

Cemp floated down into a smoothly polished granite chamber. It was furnished with settees, chairs, and tables, and there was a long, low-built bookcase at one end. But the arrangement was like that in an anteroom--formal and un-lived in. It gave him an eerie feeling.

Still in his Silkie form, he went down a staircase and into another chamber. It had soil in it, and there was vegetation, which consisted of temperate-zone Earth shrubs and flowers. Once more, the arrangement was formal.

On the third level down were Earthlike offices, with in-formation computers. Cemp, who understood such matters, recorded what they were. He observed also that no one was using this particular source of data.

He was about to go down to the next level, when an energy beam of enormous power triggered the superfast defense screen he had learned from the Kibmadine.

The coruscation as the beam interacted, in an ever-vaster intensity, with Cemp's barrier screen lit the chamber as if sunlight had suddenly been let in. It stayed lit as whoever was directing the beam tested the screen's durability in a sustained power thrust.

For Cemp, it was a fight that moved at lightning speed down the entire line of his defenses and came finally up against the hard core of the second method the Kibmadine had taught him.

There, and only there, he held his own.

## 7

A minute went by before the attacker finally seemed to accept that Cemp simply used the beam itself to maintain the barrier. Hence, it took nothing out of him, and the barrier would last as long as the beam did, reforming as often as necessary.

As suddenly as it had begun, the attacking energy ceased.

Cemp stared around him, dismayed. The entire chamber was a shambles of twisted, white-hot machinery and debris. The granite walls had crumbled, exposing raw meteorite rock. Molten rock dripped in a score of flowing rivers from the shattered ceiling and walls. Great sections were still tumbling and sliding.

What had been a modern office had become in a matter of minutes a gutted desolation of blackened metal and rock.

For Cemp, the initial staggering reality was that only the high-speed Kibmadine screen had saved him. The assault had been gauged to overwhelm and overspeed the entire Silkie defense and attack system.

The intent had been death. No bargaining, no discussion, no questions.

The hard fight had driven him down to a special logic of levels. He felt an automatic outflow of hatred.

Yet after a little, another realization penetrated. *I won!* he thought.

Calm again but savage, he went down five more levels and emerged abruptly at the upper level of a great vista, a huge open space. The city of the space Silkies spread below him.

It was precisely and exactly a small Earth city--apartment buildings, private residences, tree-lined streets. Cemp was bemused, for here, too, the native Silkies had clearly attempted to create a human atmosphere.

He could make out figures on a sidewalk far below. He started down. When he was a hundred feet above them, the people stopped and looked up at him. One--a woman--directed a startled thought at him. "Who are you?"

Cemp told her.

The reaction of the four nearest people was astonishment. But they were not afraid or hostile.

The little group, three women and one man, waited for him. As Cemp came down, he was aware that they were signaling to others. Soon a crowd had gathered, mostly in human bodies, mostly women, but an even dozen arrived in Silkie form.

Guards? he wondered. But they were not antagonistic either. Everybody was mentally open, and what was disconcerting about that was, no one showed any awareness of the attack that had been made on him in the office section near the surface.

Instantly, he saw their unawareness as an opportunity. By keeping silent and alert, he would be able to spot his vicious assailant. He presumed that the violence had been planned and carried out at the administrative level,

*I'll find those so and sos!* he thought grimly.

To his audience of innocent citizens, he said, "I'm acting as an emissary of the Earth Government. My purpose here is to discover what binding agreements are possible."

A woman called up to him, "We can't seem to change into attractive females, Earth-style. What do you suggest?"

A gale of laughter greeted her remark, Cemp was taken aback. He hadn't expected such easy friendliness from the crowd. But his determination did not waver. "I presume we can discuss that at government level," he said, "but it won't be first on the agenda."

Some remnants of his hate flow must have gone out to them with this thought, for a man said sharply, "He doesn't sound very friendly."

A woman added quickly, "Come now, Mr. Cemp. This is your real home."

Cemp had recovered. He replied in a steady, level thought, "You'll get what you give. Right now, you're giving good. But the agents your government sent to Earth made blood-thirsty threats."

His thought paused there, puzzled. For these people as they were right now did not seem to have any of that threat in them. It struck him that that should be very significant.

After a moment's hesitation, he finished, "I'm here to discover what it's all about, so why not direct me to some-one in authority?"

"We don't have authorities." That was a woman.

A man said, "Mr. Cemp, we live a completely free existence here, and you and other Earth Silkies are invited to join us."

Cemp persisted, "Who decided to send those four hundred messengers to Earth?"

"We always do that, when the time comes," another woman replied.

"Complete with threats?" asked Cemp. "Threats of death?"

The woman seemed suddenly uncertain. She turned to one of the men. "You were down there," she said. "Did you threaten violence?"

The man hesitated. "It's a little vague," he said, "but I guess so." He added quickly, "It's always been this way when E-Lerd conditions us in connection with the Power. Memory tends to fade very quickly. In fact, I hadn't recalled that threat aspect until now." He seemed astonished. "I'll be damned. I think we'd better speak to E-Lerd and find the reason for it."

Cemp telepathed directly to the man, "What was your afterfeeling about what you had done?"

"Just that I communicated that we space Silkies were here and that it was time for the Earth Silkies to become aware of their true origin."

He turned to the others. "This is incredible," he said. "I'm astounded. We need to look into E-Lerd's administration of the Power. I uttered murderous words when I was on Earth! That's not like me at all."

His complete amazement was more convincing than any-thing else could possibly have been.

Cemp said firmly, "I gather, then, that contrary to your earlier statements, you do have a leader and his name is E-Lerd."

One of the Silkies answered that. "No, he's not a leader, but I can see how that might be understood. We're free. No one tells us what to do. But we do delegate responsibilities. For example, E-Lerd is in charge of the Power, and we get its use through him. Would you like to talk to him, Mr. Cemp?"

"Indeed I would," said Cemp with intense satisfaction.

He was thinking, *The Power! Of course. Who else? The person who has control of the Power is the only one who could have attacked me!*

"My name is O-Vedd," said the space Silkie. "Come with me."

His long, bulletlike body detached itself from the group of similar bodies and darted off over the heads of the crowd. Cemp followed. They came down to a small entrance and into a narrow, smooth-walled granite corridor. After a hundred feet this opened out to another huge space. Here was a second city.

At least, for a moment that was what it looked like.

Then Cemp saw that the buildings were of a different character--not dwellings at all. For him, who was familiar with most of the paraphernalia of manufactured energy, there was no question. Some of the massive structures below were the kind that housed atomic power. Others were distributing plants for electricity. Still others had the unmis-takable shape of the Ylem transformation systems.

None of these, of course, was *the* Power, but here indeed was power in abundance.

Cemp followed O-Vedd down to the courtyard of a building complex that, despite all its shields, he had no difficulty in identifying as a source of magnetic beams.

The space Silkie landed and transformed to human form, then stood and waited for Cemp to do likewise.

"Nothing doing I" said Cemp curtly. "Ask him to come out here."

O-Vedd shrugged. As a human he was short and dark. He walked off and vanished into a doorway.

Cemp waited amid a silence that was broken only by the faint hum of power from the buildings. A breeze touched the supersensitive spy-ray extensions that he maintained in operation under all circumstances. The little wind registered through the spy mechanism but did not trigger the defense screens behind it.

It was only a breeze, after all, and he had never program-med himself to respond to such minor signals. He was about to dismiss it from his mind, about to contemplate his re-action to the space Silkies--he liked the crowd he had seen--when he thought sharply, *A breeze here!*

Up went his screen. Out projected his perceptors. He had time to notice, then, that it was indeed a breeze but that it was being stirred by a blankness in the surrounding space. Around Cemp, the courtyard grew hazy; then it faded.

There was no planetoid.

Cemp increased all signal sensitivity to maximum. He continued to float in the vacuum of space, and off to one side was the colossal white circle that was the sun. Suddenly, he felt energy drain from his body. The sensation was of his Silkie screens going up, of his system resisting outside energy at many levels.

He thought in tense dismay, *I'm in a fight. It's another attempt to kill me.*

Whatever it was, it was automatic. His own perception remained cut off, and he was impelled to experience what the attacker wanted him to.

Cemp felt like a man suddenly set upon in pitch darkness. But what was appalling about it was that his senses were being held by other forces, preventing awareness of the nature of the attack. What he saw was--

Distance disappeared!

There, spread over many miles of space, was a group of Silkies. Cemp saw them clearly, counted in his lightning fashion two hundred and eighty-eight, caught their thoughts, and recognized that these were the renegade Silkies from Earth.



Suddenly, he understood that they had been told where the Silkie planetoid was and were on their way "home".

Time was telescoped.

The entire group of Silkies was transported in what seemed an instant to within a short distance of the planetoid. Cemp could see the planetoid in the near distance--only a few miles away, twenty at the maximum.

But to him the baffling, deadly, fantastic thing was that as these marvelous events ran their course at one level of his perception, at another level the feeling remained that a determined attempt was being made to kill him.

He could see, feel, be aware of almost nothing. But throughout, the shadowy sensations continued. His energy fields were going through defensive motions. But it was all far away from his awareness, like a human dream.

Being a fully trained Silkie, Cemp watched the internal as well as the external developments with keen observation, strove instant by instant to grasp the reality, monitored incoming signals by the thousands.

He began to sense meaning and to formulate initial speculations about the nature of the physical-world phenomenon involved. And he had the feeling of being on the verge of his first computation, when, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended.

The space scene began to fade. Abruptly, it winked out.

He was back in the courtyard of the buildings that housed the magnetic-power complex. Coming toward him from the open doorway of the main building was O-Vedd. He was accompanied by a man who was of Cemp's general human build--over six feet and strongly muscled. His face was heavier than Cemp's, and his eyes were brown instead of gray.

As he came near, he said, "I am E-Lerd. Let's talk."

## 8

"To begin with, I want to tell you the history of the Silkies," E-Lerd said.

Cemp was electrified by the statement. He had been braced for a bitter quarrel, and he could feel in himself a multitude of readjusting energy flows ... proof of the severity of the second all-out fight he had been in. And he absolutely required a complete explanation for the attacks on him.

At that moment, caught up as he was in a steely rage, nothing else could have diverted his attention. But ... the history of the Silkies! To Cemp, it was instantly the most important subject in the universe.

The Silkie planetoid, E-Lerd began, had entered the solar system from outer space nearly three hundred years before. It had, in due course, been drawn into a Sol-Neptunian orbit. On its first encirclement of the Sun, Silkies visited the inner planets and found that Earth alone was inhabited.

Since they could change form, they studied the biological structure necessary to function in the two atmospheres of Earth--air and water--and set up an internal programming for that purpose.

Unfortunately, a small percentage of the human population, it was soon discovered, could tune in on the thoughts of Silkies. All those who did so in this first visit were quickly hunted down and their memories of the experience blotted out.

But because of these sensitive humans, it became necessary for Silkies to seem to be the product of human biological experiments. An interrelationship with human females was accordingly programmed into Silkies, so that the human female ovum and the male Silkie sperm would produce a Silkie who knew nothing of Silkie history.

In order to maintain this process on an automatic level, the Special People--those persons who could read Silkie minds--were maneuvered into being in charge of it.

Thereupon, all but one of the adult Silkies returned to their planetoid, which now went to the remote end of its orbit. When it came again into the vicinity of Earth, more than a hundred years later, cautious visits were made.

It became apparent that several unplanned things had happened. Human biologists had experimented with the process. As a result, in the early stages, variants had been born. These had propagated their

twisted traits and were continuing to do so, growing ever more numerous.

The actual consequences were: a number of true Silkies, capable of making the three-fold transformation at will; class-B Silkies, who could transform from human to fish state, but could not become space people; and a stable form, Variants!

The last two groups had largely taken to the oceans. Accordingly it was decided to leave the class-B Silkies alone but to make an effort to inveigle Variants into gigantic spaceships filled with water where they would be isolated and prevented from interbreeding.

This plan was already underway by the time the Silkie planetoid made its round of the sun and again headed out toward far Neptune.

Now they were back, and they had found an unfortunate situation. Somehow, Earth science, virtually ignored by the early visitors, had achieved a method for training the Silkie perception system.

The Earth Silkies had become a loyal-to-Earth, tight-knit, masterful group of beings, lacking only the Power.

Cemp "read" all this in E-Lerd's thought, and then, because he was amazed, he questioned him about what seemed a major omission in his story. Where had the Silkie planetoid come from?

E-Lerd showed his first impatience. "These journeys are too far," he telepathed. "They take too long. Nobody remembers origins. Some other star system, obviously."

"Are you serious?" Cemp was astounded. "You don't know?"

But that was the story. Pry at it as he might, it did not change. Although E-Lerd's mind remained closed except for his telepathed thoughts, O-Vedd's mind was open. In it Cemp saw the same beliefs and the same lack of information.

But why the tampering with human biology and the inter-mixing of the two breeds?

"We always do that. That's how we live--in a relationship with the inhabitants of a system."

"How do you know you always do that? You just told me you can't remember where you came from this time or where you were before that."

"Well ... it's obvious from the artifacts we brought along."

E-Lerd's attitude dismissed the questions as being irrelevant. Cemp detected a mind phenomenon in the other that explained the attitude. To space Silkies, the past was unimportant. Silkies *always* did certain things, because that was the way they were mentally, emotionally, and physically constructed.

A Silkie didn't have to know from past experience. He simply had to *be* what was innate in Silkies.

It was, Cemp realized, a basic explanation for much that he had observed. This was why these Silkies had never been trained scientifically. Training was an alien concept in the cosmos of the space Silkies.

"You mean," he protested, incredulous, "you have no idea why you left the last system where you had this interrelation-ship with the race there? Why not stay forever in some sys-tem where you have located yourself?"

"Probably," said E-Lerd, "somebody got too close to the secret of the Power. That could not be permitted."

That was the reason, he continued, why Cemp and other Silkies had to come back into the fold. As Silkies, they might learn about the Power.

The discussion had naturally come around to *that* urgent subject.

"What," said Cemp, "is the Power?"

E-Lerd stated formally that that was a forbidden subject.

Then I shall have to force the secret from you," said Cemp. There can be no agreement without it."

E-Lerd replied stiffly that any attempt at force would require him to use the Power as a defense.

Cemp lost patience. "After your two attempts to kill me," he telepathed in a steely rage, "I'll give you thirty seconds--"

"What attempts to kill you?" said E-Lerd, surprised.

At that precise moment, as Cemp was bracing himself to use logic of levels, there was an interruption.

An "impulse" band--a very low, slow vibration--touched one of the receptors in the forward part of his brain. It operated at mere multiples of the audible sound range directly on his sound-receiving system.

What was new was that the sound acted as a carrier for the accompanying thought. The result was as

if a voice spoke clearly and loudly into his ears.

“You win,” said the voice. “You have forced me. I shall talk to you myself--bypassing my unknowing servants.”

## 9

Cemp identified the incoming thought formation as a direct contact. Accordingly, his brain, which was programmed to respond instantaneously to a multitude of signals, was triggered into an instant effort to suction more impulses from the sending brain ... and he got a picture. A momentary glimpse, so brief that even after a few seconds it was hard to be sure that it was real and not a figment of fantasy.

Something huge lay in the darkness deep inside the planetoid. It lay there and gave forth with an impression of vast power. It had been withholding itself, watching him with some tiny portion of itself. The larger whole understood the universe and could manipulate massive sections of space-time.

“Say nothing to these others.” Again the statement was a direct contact that sounded like spoken words.

The dismay that had seized on Cemp in the last few moments was on the level of desperation. He had entered the Silkie stronghold in the belief that his human training and Kibmadine knowledge gave him a temporary advantage over the space Silkies and that if he did not delay, he could win a battle that might resolve the entire threat from these natural Silkies.

Instead, he had come unsuspecting into the lair of a cosmic giant. He thought, appalled, *Here is what has been called “the Power”*.

And if the glimpse he had had was real, then it was such a colossal power that all his own ability and strength were as nothing.

He deduced now that this was what had attacked him twice. “Is that true?” he telepathed on the same band as the incoming thoughts had been on.

“Yes. I admit it.”

“Why?” Cemp flashed the question. “Why did you do it?”

“So that I would not have to reveal my existence. My fear is always that if other life forms find out about me, they will analyze how to destroy me.”

The direction of the alien thought altered. “But now, listen; do as follows. ...”

The confession had again stirred Cemp’s emotions. The hatred that had been aroused in him had a sustained force deriving from the logic-of-levels stimulation--in this instance the body’s response to an attempt at total destruction. Therefore, he had difficulty now restraining additional auto-matic reactions.

But the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. So, presently he was able, at the request of the monster, to say to E-Lerd and the other Silkies, “You take a while to think this over. And when the Silkies who have defected arrive from Earth, I’ll talk to them. We can then have another discussion.”

It was such a complete change of attitude that the two Silkies showed their surprise. But he saw that to them the change had the look of weakness and that they were relieved.

“I’ll be back here in one hour!” he telepathed to E-Lerd. Whereupon he turned and climbed up and out of the court-yard, darting to an opening that led by a roundabout route deeper into the planetoid.

Again the low, slow vibration touched his receptors. “Come closer!” the creature urged.

Cemp obeyed, on the hard-core principle that either he could defend himself--or he couldn’t. Down he went, past a dozen screens, to a barren cave, a chamber that had been carved out of the original meteorite stuff. It was not even lighted. As he entered, the direct thought touched his mind again: “Now we can talk.”

Cemp had been thinking at furious speed, striving to adjust to a danger so tremendous that he had no way of evaluating it. Yet the Power had revealed itself to him rather than let E-Lerd find out anything. That seemed to be his one hold on it; and he had the tense conviction that even that was true only as long as he was inside the planetoid.

He thought ... *Take full advantage!*

He telepathed, “After those attacks, you’ll have to give me some straight answers, if you expect to deal

with me.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you want?”

It didn’t know who it was. “I have a name,” it said. “I am the Glis. There used to be many like me long ago. I don’t know what happened to them.”

“But *what* are you?”

It had no knowledge. An energy life form of unknown origin, traveling from one star system to another, remaining for a while, then leaving.

“But why leave? Why not stay?” sharply.

“The time comes when I have done what I can for a particular system.”

By using its enormous power, it transported large ice-and-air meteorites to airless planets and made them habitable, cleared away dangerous space debris, altered poisonous atmospheres into nonpoisonous ones. ...

“Presently the job is done, and I realize it’s time to go on to explore the infinite cosmos. So I make my pretty picture of the inhabited planets, as you saw, and head for outer space.”

“And the Silkies?”

They were an old meteorite life form.

“I found them long ago, and because I needed mobile units that could think, I persuaded them into a permanent relationship.”

Cemp did not ask what persuasive methods had been used. In view of the Silkies’ ignorance of what they had a relationship with, he divined that a sly method had been used. But still, what he had seen showed an outwardly peaceful arrangement. The Glis had agents--the Silkies--who acted for it in the world of tiny movements. They, in turn, had at their disposal bits and pieces of the Glis’s own “body”, which could apparently be programmed for specific tasks beyond the Silkies’ ability to perform.

“I am willing,” said the Glis, “to make the same arrangement with your government for as long as I remain in the solar system.”

But absolute secrecy would be necessary.

“Why?”

There was no immediate reply, but the communication band remained open. And along the line of communication there flowed an essence of the reaction from the Glis--an impression of unmatched power, of a being so mighty that all other individuals in the universe were less by some enormous percentage.

Cemp felt staggered anew. But he telepathed, “I must tell someone. Somebody has to know.”

“No other Silkies--absolutely.”

Cemp didn’t argue. All these millennia, the Glis had kept its identity hidden from the space Silkies. He had a total conviction that it would wreck the entire planetoid to prevent them from learning it.

He had been lucky. It had fought him at a level where only a single chamber of the meteorite had been destroyed. It had restricted itself.

“Only the top government leaders and the Silkie Council may know,” the Glis continued.

It seemed an adequate concession; yet Cemp had an awful suspicion that in the long past of this creature every person who uncovered its secret had been murdered.

Thinking thus, he could not compromise. He demanded, “Let me have a complete view of you--what I caught a fleeting glimpse of earlier.”

He sensed, then, that the Glis hesitated.

Cemp urged, “I promise that only the persons you named will be told about this--but we *must* know!”

Floating there in the cave in his Silkie form, Cemp felt a change of energy tension in the air and in the ground. Although he put forth no additional probing energies, he recognized that barriers were going down. And presently he began to record.

His first impression was of hugeness. Cemp estimated, after a long, measuring look, that the creature, a circular rocklike structure, was about a thousand feet in diameter. It was alive, but it was not a thing of flesh and blood. It “fed” from some inner energy that rivaled what existed in the heart of the sun.

And Cemp noticed a remarkable phenomenon. Magnetic impulses that passed through the creature and impinged on his senses were altered in a fashion that he had never observed before--as if they had passed through atoms of a different structure than anything he knew.

He remembered the fleeting impression he had had from the molecule. This was the same but on a massive scale. What startled him was that all his enormous training in such matters gave no Clue to what the structure might be.

“Enough?” asked the creature.

Doubtfully, Cemp said, “Yes.”

Glis accepted his reluctant agreement as a complete authorization. What had been a view through and past the cave wall disappeared abruptly.

The alien thought spoke into his mind, “I have done a very dangerous thing for me in thus revealing myself. Therefore, I again earnestly impress on you the importance of a limited number of people being told what you have just witnessed.”

In secrecy, it continued, lay the greatest safety, not only for it, but for Cemp.

“I believe,” said the creature, “that what I can do is over-whelming. But I could be wrong. What disturbs me is, there is only one of me. I would hate to suddenly feel the kind of fear that might motivate me to destroy an entire system.”

The implied threat was as deadly--and as possible--as anything Cemp had ever heard. Cemp hesitated, feeling overwhelmed, desperate for more information.

He flashed, “How old do Silkies get?” and added quickly, “We’ve had no experience, since none has yet died a natural death.”

“About a thousand of your Earth years,” was the answer.

“What have you in mind for Earth-born Silkies? Why did you want us to return here?”

Again there was a pause; once more the sense of colossal power. But presently with it there came a reluctant admission that new Silkies, born on planets, normally had less direct knowledge of the Glis than those who had made the latest trip.

Thus, the Glis had a great interest in ensuring that plenty of time was allowed for a good replacement crop of un-knowing young Silkies.

It finished, “You and I shall have to make a special agreement. Perhaps you can have E-Lerd’s position and be my contact.”

Since E-Lerd no longer remembered that he was the contact, Cemp had no sense of having being offered anything but ... danger.

He thought soberly, *I’ll never be permitted to come back here, once I leave.*

But that didn’t matter. The important thing was--get away! At once!

## 10

At the Silkie Authority, the computer gave four answers.

Cemp rejected two of them at once. They were, in the parlance of computer technology, “trials”. The machine simply presented all the bits of information, strung out in two lookovers. By this means a living brain could examine the data in segments. But Cemp did not need such data--not now.

Of the remaining two answers, one postulated a being akin to a god. But Cemp had experienced the less-than-godlike powers of the Glis, in that it had twice failed to defeat him. True, he believed that it had failed to destroy him because it did not wish to destroy the planetoid. But an omnipotent god would not have found that a limitation.

He had to act as if the amazing fourth possibility were true. The picture that had come through in that possibility was one of ancientness. The mighty being hidden in the planetoid predated most planetary systems.

“In the time from which it derives,” said the computer, “there were, of course, stars and star systems, but they were different. The natural laws were not what they are today. Space and time have made adjustments since then, grown older; therefore, the present appearance of the universe is different from

that which the Glis knew at its beginnings. This seems to give it an advantage, for it knows some of the older shapes of atoms and molecules and can re-create them. Certain of these combinations reflect the state of matter when it was--the best comparison--younger."

The human government group, to whom Cemp presented this data, was stunned. Like himself, they had been basing their entire plan on working out a compromise with the space Silkies. Now, suddenly, here was a colossal being with unknown power.

"Would you say," asked one man huskily, "that to a degree the Silkies are slaves of this creature?"

Cemp said, "E-Lerd definitely didn't know what he was dealing with. He simply had what he conceived to be a scientific system for utilizing a force of nature. The Glis responded to his manipulation of this system, as if it were simply another form of energy. But I would guess that it controlled him, perhaps through preconditioning installed long ago."

As he pointed out, such a giant life form would not be concerned with the everyday living details of its subjects. It would be satisfied with having a way of invariably getting them to do what it wanted.

"But what *does* it want?" That came from another man.

"It goes around doing good," said Cemp with a tight smile. "That's the public image it tried to give me. I have the impression that it's willing to make over the solar system to our specifications."

At this point Mathews spoke. "Mr. Cemp," he said, "what does all this do to the Silkie situation?"

Cemp said that the Silkies who had defected had clearly acted hastily; "But," he finished, "I should tell you that I find the space Silkies a very likeable group. In my opinion, they are not the problem. They have the same problem, in another way, that we have."

"Nat," said Charley Baxter, "do you trust this monster?"

Cemp hesitated, remembering the deadly attacks, re-remembering that only the Kibmadine defense screen and energy-reversal process had saved him. He remembered, too, that the great being had been compelled to reveal its presence to prevent him from forcing E-Lerd to open his mind--which would have informed the space Silkies of the nature of the Power.

"No!" he said.

Having spoken, he realized that a simple negative was not answer enough. It could not convey the reality of the terrifying danger that was out there in space.

He said slowly, "I realize that my own motives may be suspect in what I am about to say, but it's my true opinion. I think all Earth Silkies should be given full knowledge of the Kibmadine attack-and-defense system at once and that they should be assigned to work in teams to keep a constant watch on the Glis, permitting no one to leave the planetoid--except to surrender."

There was a pregnant silence. Then a scientist said in a small voice, "Any chance of logic of levels applying?"

"I don't see how," said Cemp.

"I don't either," said the man unhappily.

Cemp addressed the group again. "I believe we should gird ourselves to drive this thing from the solar system. We're not safe until it's gone."

As he finished speaking, he sensed an energy tension ... familiar! He had a sensation, then, of cosmic distance and cosmic time--opening. Power unlimited!

It was the same feeling he had had in the second attack, when his senses had been confused.

The fear that came to Cemp in that moment had no parallel in his experience. It was the fear of a man who suddenly has a fleeting glimpse of death and destruction for all his own kind and for his planet.

As he had that awful consciousness, Cemp whirled from where he was standing. He ran headlong toward the great window behind him, shattering it with an arc of lightning as he did so. And with eyes closed against the flying glass, he plunged out into the empty air seventy stories above the ground.

As he fell, the fabric of space and time collapsed around him like a house of cards tumbling. Cemp transformed into class-C Silkie and became immensely more perceptive. Now he sensed the nature of the colossal energy at work--a gravitational field so intense that it actually closed in upon itself. Encompassing all things, organic and inorganic, it squeezed with irresistible power. ...

Defensively, Cemp put up, first, his inverter system ... and perceived that that was not the answer.

Instantly, he triggered gravity transformation--an in-finitely variable system that converted the encroaching superfield to a harmless energy in relation to himself.

With that, he felt the change slow. It did not stop. He was no longer so involved, so enveloped; yet he was not completely free.

He realized what held him. He was oriented to this massive segment of space-time. To an extent, anything that happened here happened to him. To that extent, he could not get away.

The world grew dim. The sun disappeared.

Cemp saw with a start that he was inside a chamber and realized that his automatic screens had protected him from striking the hard, glittering walls.

And he became aware of three other realities. The chamber was familiar, in that there below him was one of the glowing images of a planet. The image showed the oceans and the continents, and since he was looking down at it, he felt that he was somehow back inside the Silkie planetoid, in one of the "art" rooms.

What was different was that as he looked down at the planetary image, he saw the familiar outlines of the continents and oceans of Earth. And he realized that the feeling of a virtually unlimited force pressing in was a true explanation of what was happening.

The ancient monster that lived at the core of the planetoid had taken Earth, compressed it and everything on it from an 8,000-mile-in-diameter planet into a hundred-foot ball, and added the ball to its fabulous collection.

It was not a jewel-like image of Earth there in the floor--it was Earth itself.

Even as he had the thought, Cemp sensed that the planetoid was increasing its speed.

He thought, *We're leaving the solar system.*

In a matter of minutes, as he hovered there, helpless to act, the speed of the planetoid became hundreds, then thousands of miles a second.

After about an hour of continuing acceleration, the velocity of the tiny planetoid, in its ever-widening hyperbolic orbit, was nearly half that of light.

A few hours later, the planetoid was beyond the orbit of Pluto, and it was traveling at near light speed.

And still accelerating ...

## 11

Cemp began to brace himself. Anger spilled through him like a torrent down a rocky decline.

"You incredible monster!" he telepathed.

No answer.

Cemp raged on, "You're the most vicious creature that ever existed. I'm going to see that you get what's coming to you!"

This time he got a reply. "I'm leaving the solar system forever," said the Glis. "Why don't you get off before it's too late? I'll let you get away."

Cemp had no doubt of that. He was its most dangerous enemy, and his escape and unexpected appearance must have come as a hideous shock to the Glis.

"I'm not leaving," he retorted, "until you undo what you've done to Earth."

There was silence.

"Can you and will you?" Cemp demanded.

"No. It's impossible." The response came reluctantly.

"But you could, if you wanted to, bring Earth back to size."

"No. But I now wish I had not taken your planet," said the Glis unhappily. "It has been my policy to leave alone inhabited worlds that are protected by powerful life forms. I simply could not bring myself to believe that any Silkie was really dangerous to me. I was mistaken."

It was not the kind of repentance that Cemp respected. "Why can't you ... unsqueeze it?" he persisted.

It seemed that the Glis could create a gravity field, but it could not reverse such a field. It said apologetically, "It would take as much power to undo it as it took to do it. Where is there such power?"

Where, indeed? But still he could not give up. "I'll teach you what antigravity is like," Cemp offered, "from what I can do in my own energy-control system."

But the Glis pointed out that it had had the opportunity to study such systems in other Silkies. "Don't think I didn't try. Evidently antigravity is a late manifestation of matter and energy. And I'm an early form--as you, and only you, know."

Cemp's hope faded suddenly. Somehow, he had kept believing that there was a possibility. There wasn't.

The first grief touched him, the first real acceptance of the end of Earth.

The Glis was communicating again. "I can see that you and I now have a serious situation between us. So we must arrive at an agreement. I'll make you the leader of the Silkie nation. I'll subtly influence everything and everyone to fit your wishes. Women--as many as you desire. Control--as much as you want. Future actions of the planetoid, you and I shall decide."

Cemp did not even consider the offer. He said grimly, "You and I don't think alike. I can just imagine trusting you to leave me alone if I ever took the chance of changing to human form." He broke off, then said curtly, "The deal as I see it is a limited truce while I consider what I can do against you and you figure out what you can do to me."

"Since that's the way you feel," was the harsh reply, "let me make my position clear. If you begin any action against me, I shall first destroy Earth and the Silkie nation and then give you my attention."

Cemp replied in his own steely fashion, "If you ever damage anything I value--and that includes all Silkies and what's left of Earth--I'll attack you with everything I've got."

The Glis said scornfully, "You have nothing that can touch me--except those defense screens that reverse the attack flow. That way, you can use my own force against me. So I won't attack. Therefore--permanent stalemate."

Cemp said, "We'll see."

The Glis said, "You yourself stated that your levels of logic wouldn't work on me."

"I meant not directly," said Cemp. "There are many indirect approaches to the mind."

"I don't see how anything like that can work on me," was the reply.

At that moment, Cemp didn't either.

## 12

Through miles of passageways, up as well as down and roundabout, Cemp made his way. The journey took him through long chambers filled with furniture and art objects from other planets.

En route he saw strange and wonderful scenes in bas-relief and brilliant color on one wall after another. And always there were the planets themselves, glowingly beautiful, but horrifying too, in his awareness that each one represented a hideous crime.

His destination was the city of the Silkies. He followed the internal pathway to it because he dared not leave the planet-oid to take an external route. The Glis had virtually admitted that it had not anticipated that he, its most dangerous enemy, would survive. So if he ever left these caves, he would have no further choice, no chance to decide on what the penalty--if any--or the outcome should be and no part at all in the Silkie future. For he would surely never be allowed to return.

Not that there was any purpose in him--his grief was too deep and terrible. He had failed to protect, failed to realize, failed in his duty.

Earth was lost. It was lost quickly, completely, a disaster so great that it could not even be contemplated for more than instants at a time.

At intervals, he mourned Joanne and Charley Baxter and other friends among the Special People and the human race.

By the time he was sunk into these miseries, he had taken up an observation position on top of a tree overlooking the main street of the Silkie city. There he waited, with all his signal systems constantly at peak alert.

While he maintained his tireless vigil, the life of the Silkie community had its being around him. The



Silkies continued to live mostly as humans, and this began to seem significant.

Cemp thought, shocked, *They're being kept vulnerable!*

In human form, they could all be killed in a single flash of intolerable flame.

He telepathed on the Glis band: "Free them from that compulsion or I'll tell them the truth about what you are."

An immediate, ferocious answer came: "You say one word, and I shall wipe out the entire nest."

Cemp commanded, "Release them from that compulsion, or we come to our crisis right now."

His statement must have given the Glis pause, for there was a brief silence. Then, "I'll release half of them. No more. I must retain some hold over you."

Cemp considered that and realized its truth. "But it has to be on an alternating basis. Half are free for twelve hours, then the other half."

The Glis accepted the compromise without further argument. Clearly, it was prepared to recognize the balance of power.

"Where are we heading?" asked Cemp.

"To another star system."

The answer did not satisfy Cemp. Surely the Glis didn't expect to go on with its malignant game of collecting inhabited planets.

He challenged, "I feel that you have some secret purpose."

"Don't be ridiculous, and don't bother me any more."

Stalemate.

As the days and the weeks went by, Cemp tried to keep track of the distance the planetoid was covering and the direction it was going. The speed of the meteorite had reached nearly a light-year per day, Earth time.

Eighty-two of those days passed. And then there was the feel of slowing down. The deceleration continued all that day and the next. And for Cemp, there was finally no question--he could not permit this strange craft which was now his home to arrive at a destination about which he knew nothing.

"Stop this ship!" he ordered.

The Glis replied angrily, "You can't expect to control such minor things as this!"

Since it could be a deadly dangerous scheme, Cemp replied, "Then open yourself to me. Show me everything you know about this system."

"I've never been here before."

"All right, then that's what I'll see when you open up."

"I can't possibly let you look inside me. You may see something this time that will make me vulnerable to your techniques."

"Then change course."

"No. That would mean I can't go anywhere until you die about a thousand years from now. I refuse to accept such a limitation."

The second reference to Silkie age gave Cemp great pause. On Earth no one had known how long Silkies could live, since none born there had died a natural death ... He himself was only thirty-eight years of age.

"Look," he said finally, "if I have only a thousand years, why don't you just sit me out? That must be only a pinpoint in time compared with your lifespan."

"All right, we'll do that!" replied the Glis. But the deceleration continued.

Cemp telepathed, "If you don't turn aside, I must take action."

"What can you do?" was the contemptuous response.

It was a good question. What, indeed?

"I warn you," said Cemp.

"Just don't tell anyone about me. Other than that, do anything you please."

Cemp said, "I gather you've decided I'm not dangerous. And this is the way you act with those you consider harm-less."

The Glis said that had Cemp been able to do something, he would already have done it. It finished,

“And so I tell you flatly, I’m going to do as *I* please; and the only restriction on you is, don’t violate my need for secrecy. Now, don’t bother me again.”

The meaning of the dismissal was clear. He had been judged helpless, categorized as someone whose desires need not be considered. The eighty days of inaction had stood against him. He hadn’t attacked; therefore, he couldn’t. That was palpably the other’s logic.

Well ... what could he do?

He could make an energy assault. But that would take time to mount, and he could expect that the Silkie nation would be wiped out in retaliation and Earth destroyed.

Cemp decided that he was not ready to force such a calamity.

He was presently dismayed to realize that the Glis’s analysis was correct. He could keep his mind shut and respect its need for secrecy--and nothing more.

He ought, it seemed to him, to point out to the Glis that there were different types of secrecy. Gradations. Secrecy about itself was one type. But secrecy about the star system ahead was quite another. The whole subject of secrecy--

Cemp’s mind poised. Then he thought, *How could I have missed it?*

Yet, even as he wondered, he realized how it had happened. The Glis’s need to withhold knowledge of itself had seemed understandable, and somehow the naturalness of it had made him bypass its implications. But now ...

*Secrecy*, he thought. *Of course! That’s it!*

To Silkies, secrecy was an understood phenomenon.

After a few more seconds of thinking about it, Cemp took his first action. He reversed gravity in relation to the planetoid mass below him. Light as a thistledown, he floated up and away from the treetop that had been his observation post for so long. Soon he was speeding along granite corridors.

### 13

Without incident, Cemp reached the chamber containing Earth.

As he set his signals so that all his screens would protect that precious round ball, Cemp permitted himself another increment of hope.

Secrets! he thought again, and his mind soared.

Life, in its natural impulse, had no secrets.

Baby gurgled or cried or manifested needs instant by instant as each feeling was experienced. But the child, growing older, was progressively admonished and inhibited, subjected to a thousand restraints. Yet all his life the growing being would want openness and unrestraint, would struggle to free himself from childhood conditioning.

Conditioning was not of itself logic of levels, but it was related--a step lower. The appearance was of a control center; that is, a rigidity. But it was a created center and could be repeatedly mobilized by the correct stimulus. That part was automatic.

The decisive fact was that, since the Glis had conditioned itself to secrecy--it was conditionable.

Having reached this penultimate point in his analysis, Cemp hesitated. As a Silkie, he was conditioned to incapacitate rather than kill, to negotiate rather than incapacitate, and to promote well-being everywhere.

Even for the Glis, death should be the final consideration not the first.

So he telepathed, “In all your long span, you have feared that someone would one day learn how to destroy-you. I have to tell you that I am that feared person. So unless you are prepared to back down from those insolent statements of a little while ago, you must die.”

The answer came coldly. “I let you go to your planet. Earth because I have the real hostages under my complete control--the Silkie nation!”

“That is your final statement?” Cemp questioned.

“Yes. Cease these foolish threats. They are beginning to irritate me.”

Cemp now said, “I know where you come from, what you are, and what happened to others like

you.”

Of course, he knew nothing of the kind. But it was the technique. By stating the generalization, he would evoke from the Glis’s perception and memory network, first, the truth. Then, like all living things, the Glis would immediately have the automatic impulse to give forth the information as it actually was.

Yet before it could do so, it would exercise the restraint of secrecy. And that would be an exact pattern, a reaffirmation of similar precise restraints in its long, long past. His problem was to utilize it before it destimulated, because as long as it held, it was the equivalent of a logic-of-levels gestalt.

Having, according to the theory, mobilized it, Cemp transmitted the triggering signal.

A startled thought came from the Glis: “What have you done?”

It was Cemp’s turn to be sly, covert, scheming. He said, “I had to call to your attention that you had better deal with me.”

It was too late for the Glis to help itself, but the pretense--if successful--might save many lives.

“I wish to point out,” said the Glis, “that I have not yet damaged anything of value.”

Cemp was profoundly relieved to hear the statement. But he had no regrets. With such a creature as this, he could not hope to repeat what he was doing against it. Once the process was started, it was all or nothing.

“What was it you said before about bargaining?” the Glis asked urgently.

Cemp steeled himself against sympathy.

The Glis continued, “I’ll give you all my secrets in exchange for your telling me what you’re doing to me. I’m experiencing severe internal disturbance, and I don’t know why.”

Cemp hesitated. It was a tremendous offer. But he divined that once he made such a promise, he would have to keep it.

What had happened was this: As he had hoped, his final signal had triggered the equivalent of a colony gestalt, in this instance the process by which life forms slowly over the millennia adjusted to exterior change.

And the cycle-completing control centers, the growth-change mechanisms in the great being, were stimulated.

Silkies understood the nature of growth, and of change they knew much from their own bodies. But Silkies were late indeed in the scheme of life. In terms of evolution, their cells were as old as the rocks and the planets. The entire history of life’s progression was in every cell of a Silkie.

That could not be true of the Glis. It was from an ancient eon, and it had stopped time within itself. Or at least, it had not passed on its seed, which was the way of change through time. In itself, it manifested old, primitive forms. Great forms they were, but the memory in each cell would be limited to what had gone before. Therefore, it couldn’t know what, in holding back as it had, it was holding back from.

“I promise not to go on to the Nijjan system,” said the Glis. “Observe--I’m already stopping.”

Cemp sensed a cessation of the motion of the planetoid, but it seemed a minor act, not meaningful.

He merely noted, in passing, the identity of the star the Glis had named, observing that since it knew the name, it *had* been there before. This seemed to imply that the Glis had a purpose in going there.

It didn’t matter; they were turning away from it, would never reach it. If there was a threat there for Cemp or for Silkies, it was now diverted and had been useful only in that it had forced him to action regardless of the consequences.

The Glis’s willingness to make amends when it no longer had any choice was merely a sad commentary on its character, but much too late. Many planets too late, Cemp thought.

How many? he wondered. And because he was in the strange emotional condition of someone whose whole thought and effort are concentrated on a single intensely felt purpose, he asked the question aloud automatically, as it came into his mind.

“I don’t think I should tell you; you might hold it against me,” the Glis replied.

It must have sensed Cemp’s adamant state, for it said quickly, “Eighteen hundred and twenty-three.”

So many!

The total of them did not shock Cemp--it hurt him. For one of that countless number of unnecessary dead on those planets was Joanne. Another was Charley Baxter.

“Why have you done all this?” Cemp asked. “Why destroy all those planets?”

“They were so beautiful.”

True. Cemp had a sudden mental vision of a great planet hanging in space, its atmosphere ballooning up above the oceans and mountains and plains. He had seen that sight often, yet found it always a thing of splendor beyond all the visual delights of the universe.

The feeling passed, for a planet was beautiful when it was brooded over by its parent sun and not as a shrunken museum piece.

The Glis with its planets was like a head hunter of old. Skillfully, he had murdered each victim. Patiently, he had reduced the head to its small size. Lovingly, he had placed it in his collection.

For the head hunter, each perfect miniature head was a symbol of his manhood. For the Glis, the planets were ... what?

Cemp couldn't imagine.

But he had delayed long enough. He sensed incipient violence on the communication band. He said hastily, “All right, I agree--as soon as you do what I want, I'll tell you exactly how I'm attacking you.”

“What do you want?”

Cemp said, “First, let the other Silkies go outside.”

“But you'll do as I've asked?”

“Yes. When you've released them, put me and the Earth outside, safely.”

“Then you'll tell me?”

“Yes.”

The Glis threatened, “If you don't, I'll smash your little planet. I will not let you or it escape, if you don't tell me.”

“I'll tell you.”

## 14

The method that was used was, the entire section of the planetoid surrounding Cemp simply lifted up and shot off into the sky. Cemp found himself floating in black, empty space, surrounded by meteorite debris.

The Glis's thought came to him, “I have done my part. Now tell me!”

Even as Cemp complied, he began to wonder if he really understood what was happening.

Uneasiness came. In setting in motion a cycle-completion process, he had taken it for granted that Nature would strike a balance. An old life form had somehow been preserved here, and in its body, evolution was now proceeding at lightning speed. Millions of years of change had already been compressed into minutes of time. Since none other of its kind remained alive, he had assumed that the species had long since evolved to ... what?

What was this creature? A chrysalis? An egg? Would it become a butterfly of space, a great worm, a gigantic bird?

Such possibilities had not occurred to him before. He had thought only of the possibility of extinction. But--it struck him keenly--he hadn't considered seriously enough what extinction might consist of in its end product.

Indeed, he hadn't thought about the existence of an end product.

Unhappily, Cemp remembered what the computer had reported--that the atomic structure of this giant being reflected a younger state of matter.

Could it be that, as the particles “adjusted” and changed to current norm, energy would be released on a hitherto unknown scale?

Below, a titanic thing happened.

Part of the planetoid lifted, and a solid ball of red-hot matter, at least a mile thick, lifted slowly out of it. As Cemp drew aside to let the improbable thing past him, he saw that an even more unlikely phenomenon was taking place. The “up” speed of the chunk of now white-hot rock and dirt was increasing--and the mass was growing.

It was well past him, and it was at least a hundred miles in diameter. A minute later, it was five hundred

miles thick, and it was still expanding, still increasing in speed.

It expanded to a burning, incredible mass.

Suddenly, it was ten thousand miles in diameter and was still going away, still growing.

Cemp sent out a general alarm: "Get away--as fast as you can. Away!"

As he himself fled, using a reversal of the gravity of the monstrous body behind him, he saw that in those few minutes it had grown more than 100,000 miles in diameter.

It was quite pink at this point--strangely, beautifully pink.

The color altered even as he watched, turning faintly yellow. And the body that emitted the beautiful other light was now more than 1,000,000 miles in diameter.

As big as Earth's sun.

In minutes more, it grew to the size of a giant blue sun, ten times the diameter of Sol.

It began to turn pink again, and it grew *one hundred times* in ten minutes. Brighter than Mira the Wonderful, bigger than glorious Ras Algethi.

But pink, not red. A deeper pink than before; not red, so definitely not a variable.

All around was the starry universe, bright with unfamiliar objects that glowed near and far--hundreds of them, strung out like a long line of jack-o'-lanterns.

Below was Earth.

Cemp looked at that scene in the heavens and then at the near, familiar planet, and an awful excitement seized him.

He thought, *Is it possible that everything had to grow, that the Glis's change altered this entire area of space-time?*

Old forms could not keep their suppressed state once the supercolossal pink giant completed the growth that had somehow been arrested from time's beginning.

And so the Glis was now a sun in its prime, but with eighteen hundred and twenty-three planets strung out like so many starry brilliants over the whole near sky.

Everywhere he looked were planets so close to him that they looked like moons. He made a quick, anxious calculation and realized with great relief that all those planets were still within the warming area of the monstrous sun that hung out there, half a light-year away.

As Cemp descended, at the top speed his Silkie body could withstand, into the huge atmosphere blanket that surrounded Earth, everything seemed the same--the land, the sea, the cities. ...

He swooped low over one highway and observed cars going along it.

He headed for the Silkie Authority in a haze of wonder and saw the shattered window from which he had leaped so dramatically--not yet repaired!

When, moments later, he landed among the same group of men who had been there at his departure, he realized there had been some kind of a time stasis, related to size.

For Earth and its people, that eighty days had been ... eighty seconds.

Afterwards, he would hear how people had experienced what seemed like an earthquake, tension in their bodies, momentary sensory blackout, a brief feeling that it was dark. ...

Now, as he entered, Cemp transformed to human form and said in a piercing voice, "Gentlemen, prepare for the most remarkable piece of information in the history of the universe. That pink sun out there is not the result of an atmospheric distortion.

"And, gentlemen, Earth now has eighteen hundred inhabited sister planets. Let's begin to organize for a fantastic future!"

Later, comfortably back in his Florida home, Cemp said to Joanne, "Now we can see why the Silkie problem didn't have a solution as things stood. For Earth, two thousand of us was saturation. But in this new sun system. ..."

It was no longer a question of what to do with the 6,000 members of the Silkie nation but of how they could get a hundred such groups to cope with the work to be done.

Quickly!

# THE PROXY INTELLIGENCE

## I

*Take a sentient being--*

Even Steve Hanardy could fit that description. He was a short, stocky man, with the look about him of someone who had lived too close to the animal stage. His eyes were perpetually narrowed, as if he were peering against a bright light. His face was broad and fleshy. But he was human. He could think and act, and he was a giver and not a taker.

*--Put this sentient person in a solar system surrounded by a two billion light-year ocean of virtual nothingness beyond which, apparently, is more nothingness--*

Hanardy, a product of the Earth's migration to the moon and to the planets of the solar system, was born on Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter, before the educational system caught up to the colonists. He grew up an incoherent roustabout and a spacehand on the freighters and passenger liners that sped about among the immense amount of debris--from moons to habitable meteorites--that surrounded the massive Jupiter. It was a rich and ever-growing trade area, and so presently even the stolid, unimaginative Hanardy had a freighter of his own. Almost from the beginning, his most fruitful journeys were occasional trips to the meteorite where a scientist, Professor Ungarn, lived with his daughter, Patricia. For years, it was a lucrative, routine voyage, without incident.

*--Confront this sentient individual with this enigma of being--*

The last voyage had been different.

To begin with, he accepted a passenger--a reporter named William Leigh, who ostensibly wanted to write up the lonely route for his news syndicate. But almost as soon as the freighter reached the Ungarn meteorite and entered the air-lock, the meteorite was attacked by strange space vessels, which were capable of far greater speeds than anything Hanardy had ever seen. And William Leigh was not who he seemed.

It was hard to know just who he was. What actually happened as far as Hanardy was concerned, was quite simple: One of the defensive energy screens had gone down before the attack of the strange ships; and Professor Ungarn sent Hanardy to machine a new part for the screen's drive unit. While he was engaged in this, Leigh came upon him by surprise, attacked him, and tied him up.

Lying there on the floor, bound hand and foot, Hanardy thought in anguish: "If I ever get loose, I'm gonna hightail it out of here!"

He tested the rope that held him and groaned at its un-yielding toughness. He lay, then, for a while, accepting the confinement of the bonds, but underneath was a great grief and a great fear.

He suspected that Professor Ungarn and the professor's daughter, Patricia, were equally helpless, or they would have tried during the past hour to find out what had happened to him.

He listened again, intently, holding himself still. But only the steady throbbing of the distant dynamos was audible. No footsteps approached; there was no other movement.

He was still listening when he felt an odd tugging inside his body.

Shivering a little, Hanardy shook his head as if to clear it of mental fog--and climbed to his feet.

He didn't notice that the cords that had bound him fell away.

Out in the corridor, he paused tensely. The place looked deserted, empty. Except for the vague vibration from the dynamos, a great silence pressed in upon him. The place had the look and feel of being on a planet. The artificial gravity made him somewhat lighter than on Earth, but he was used to such changes. It was hard to grasp that he was inside a meteorite, hundreds of thousands of miles from the

nearest moon or inhabited planet. Being here was like being inside a big building, on an upper floor.

Hanardy headed for the neatest elevator shaft. He thought: I'd better untie Miss Pat, then her pop, and then get.

It was an automatic decision, to go to the girl first. Despite her sharp tongue, he admired her. He had seen her use weapons to injure, but that didn't change his feeling. He guessed that she'd be very angry--very possibly she'd blame him for the whole mess.

Presently he was knocking hesitantly on the door to Patricia's apartment. Hesitantly, because he was certain that she was not in a position to answer.

When, after a reasonable pause, there was no reply, he pressed gently on the latch. The door swung open.

He entered pure enchantment.

The apartment was a physical delight. There were French-type windows that opened onto a sunlit window. The French doors were open, and the sound of birds singing wafted in through them. There were other doors leading to the inner world of the girl's home, and Hanardy, who had occasionally been in the other rooms to do minor repair work, knew that there also everything was as costly as it was here in this large room that he could see.

Then he saw the girl. She was lying on the floor, half-hidden behind her favorite chair, and she was bound hand and foot with wire.

Hanardy walked toward her unhappily. It was he who had brought William Leigh, and he wasn't quite sure just how he would argue himself out of any accusation she might make about that. His guilt showed in the way he held his thick-set body, in the shuffling of his legs, in the awkward way he knelt beside her. He began gingerly to deal with the thin wire that enlaced and interlaced her limbs.

The girl was patient. She waited till he had taken all the wire off her and then, without moving from the floor, began to rub the circulation back into her wrists and ankles.

She looked up at him and made her first comment: "How did you avoid being tied up?"

"I didn't. He got me, too," said Hanardy. He spoke eagerly, anxious to be one of the injured, along with her. He already felt better. She didn't seem to be angry.

"Then how did you get free?" Patricia Ungarn asked.

"Why, I just--" Hanardy began.

He stopped, thunderstruck. He thought back, then over what had happened. He had been lying there, tied. And then ... and then ...

What?

He stood blank, scarcely daring to think. Realizing that an answer was expected, he began apologetically, "I guess he didn't tie me up so good, and I was in a kind of a hurry, figuring you were here, and so I just--"

Even as he spoke, his whole being rocked with the remembrance of how tough those ropes had been a few minutes before he freed himself.

He stopped his mumbling explanation because the girl wasn't listening, wasn't even looking. She had climbed to her feet, and she was continuing to rub her hands. She was small of build and good-looking in a bitter way. Her lips were pressed too tightly together; her eyes were slightly narrowed with a kind of permanent anxiety. Except for that, she looked like a girl in her teens, but cleverer and more sophisticated than most girls her age.

Even as Hanardy, in his heavy way, was aware of the complexity of her, she faced him again. She said with an un-girl-like decisiveness, "Tell me everything that happened to you." Hanardy was glad to let go of the unsatisfactory recollection of his own escape. He said, "First thing I know, this guy comes in there while I'm working at the lathe. And is he strong, and is he fast! I never would've thought he had that kind of muscle and that fast way of moving. I'm pretty chunky, y'understand--"

"What then?" She was patient, but there was a pointedness about her question that channeled his attention back to the main line of events.

"Then he ties me up, and then he goes out, and then he takes those Dreeghs from the spaceship and

disappears into space.” Hanardy shook his head, wonderingly. “That’s what gets me. How did he do that?”

He paused, in a brown study; but he came from the distance of his thought back into the room, to realize guiltily that the girl had spoken to him twice.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I was thinking about how he did that, and it’s kind of hard to get the idea.” He finished, almost accusingly: “Do you know what he does?”

The girl looked at him, a startled expression on her face. Hanardy thought she was angry at his inattention and said hastily: “I didn’t hear what you wanted me to do. Tell me again, huh!”

She seemed unaware that he had spoken. “What *does* he do, Steve?”

“Why, he just--”

At that point, Hanardy stopped short and glanced back mentally over the glib words he had been using. It was such a fantastic dialogue, that he could feel the blood draining from his cheeks.

“Huh!” he said.

“What does he do, Steve?” He saw that she was looking at him, as if she understood something that he didn’t. It irritated him.

He said unhappily: “I’d better go and untie your father before that last bunch of Dreeghs shows up.”

Having spoken, he stopped again, his mouth open in amazement. He thought: “I must be nuts. What am I saying?”

He turned and started for the door.

“Come back here!”

Her voice, sharp and commanding, cut into him. Defensively, he put up between himself and her the thick barrier of stolidity which had served him for so many years in his relations with other people. He swung awkwardly around to face her again. Before he could speak, she said with intensity: “How did he do it, Steve?”

The question ran up against a great stubbornness in him. He had no feeling of deliberately resisting her. But the mental fog seemed to settle down upon his being, and he said: “Do what, Miss?”

“Leave?”

“Who?” He felt stupid before her questions, but he felt even more stupid for having had meaningless thoughts and said meaningless things.

“Leigh--you fool! That’s who.”

“I thought he took that spaceboat of yours that looks like an automobile.”

There was a long pause. The girl clenched and unclenched her hands. Now she seemed very unchildlike indeed. Hanardy, who had seen her angry before, cringed and waited for the thunder and lightning of her rage to, lash out at him. Instead, the tenseness faded. She seemed suddenly thoughtful and said with unexpected gentleness: “After that, Steve? After he got out there!”

She swung her arm and pointed at the aviary, where the sunlight glinted beyond the French windows. Hanardy saw, birds fluttering among the trees. Their musical cries gave the scene a homey touch, as if it really were a garden. As he watched, the tree leaves stirred; and he knew that hidden fans were blowing an artificial breeze. It was like a summer, afternoon, except that just beyond the glasslike wall was the blackness of space.

It was a cosmic night outside, disturbed here and there by an atom of matter--a planet hidden from sight by its own relative smallness and distance from anything else, a sun, a point of light and energy, quickly lost in darkness so vast that presently its light would fade, and become one grain in a misty bright cloud that obscured the blackness for a moment of universe time and occupied an inch of space, or so it seemed. ...

Hanardy contemplated that startling vista. He was only vaguely aware that his present intensity of interest was quite different from similar thoughts he had had in the past. On his long journeys, such ideas had slipped into and out of his mind. He recalled having had a thought about it just a few months before. He had been looking out of a porthole, and--just for an instant--the mystery of the empty immensity had touched him. And he’d thought: “What the heck ‘is behind all this? How does a guy like me rate being



alive?"

Aloud, Hanardy muttered: "I'd better get your father free, Miss Pat." He finished under his breath: "And then beat it out of here--fast."

## 2

He turned, and this time, though she called after him angrily, he stumbled out into the corridor and went down to the depths of the meteorite, where the dynamos hummed and throbbed; and where, presently, he had Professor Ungarn untied.

The older man was quite cheerful. "Well, Steve, we're not dead yet. I don't know why they didn't jump in on us, but the screens are still holding, I see."

He was a gaunt man with deep-set eyes and the unhappiest face Hanardy had ever seen. He stood, rubbing the circulation back into his arms. Strength of intellect shone from his face, along with the melancholy. He had defended the meteorite in such a calm, practical way from the attack-ing Dreeghs that it was suddenly easy to realize that this sad-faced man was actually the hitherto unsuspected observer of the solar system for a vast galactic culture, which included at its top echelon the Great Galactic--who had been William Leigh--and at the bottom, Professor Ungarn and his lovely daughter.

The thoughts about that seeped into Hanardy's fore-conscious. He realized that the scientist was primarily a pro-tector. He and this station were here to prevent contact between Earth and the galaxy. Man and his earth-born civilization were still too low on the scale of development to be admitted to awareness that a gigantic galactic culture existed. Interstellar ships of other low-echelon cultures which *had* been admitted to the galactic union were warned away, from the solar system whenever they came too close. Accidentally, the hunted, lawless Dreeghs had wandered into this forbidden sector of space. In their lust for blood and life energy they had avidly concentrated here in the hope of gaining such a quantity of blood, and so great a supply of life energy, that they would be freed for endless years from their terrible search.

It had been quite a trap, which had enabled the Great Galactic to capture so many of them. But now another ship-load of Dreeghs was due; and this time there was no trap. Professor Ungarn was speaking: "Did you get that part machined before Leigh tied you up?" He broke off: "What's the matter, Steve?"

"Huh! Nothing." Hanardy came out of a depth of wonder-ment: "I'd better get onto that job. It'll take a half hour, maybe."

Professor Ungarn nodded and said matter-of-factly: "I'll feel better when we get that additional screen up. There's quite a gang out there."

Hanardy parted his lips to say that that particular "gang" was no longer a problem, but that another supership, a late arrival, would shortly appear on the scene. He stopped the words, unspoken; and now he was consciously dismayed. "What's going on?" he wondered. "Am I nuts?"

Almost blank, he headed down to the machine shop. As he entered, he saw the ropes that had bound him, lying on the floor. He walked over in a haze of interest and stooped to pick up one of the short sections.

It came apart in his ringers, breaking into a fine, powdery stuff, some of which drifted into his nostrils. He sneezed noisily.

The rope, he discovered, was all like that. He could hardly get over it. He kept picking up the pieces, just so that he could feel them crumble. When he had nothing but a scat-tering of dust, he stood up and started on the lathe job. He thought absently: "If that next batch of Dreeghs arrives, then maybe I can start believing all this stuff."

He paused and for the first time thought: "Now, where did I get that name, Dreegh?"

Instantly, he was trembling so violently that he had to stop work. Because--if he could get the professor to admit that that was what they were--*Dreeghs*--then. ...

Then what?

"Why, it'd prove everything," he thought. "Just that one thing!"

Already, the crumbled rope, and whatever it proved, was fading into the background of his recollection, no longer quite real, needing to be reinforced by some new miracle. As it happened, he asked the question under optimum circumstances. He handed the part to the scientist and managed to ask about the Dreeghs as the older man was turning away. Ungarn began immediately with an obvious urgency to work on the shattered section of the energy screen drive. It was from there, intent on what he was doing, and in an absent-minded tone, that he answered Hanardy's question.

"Yes, yes," he muttered. "Dreeghs. Vampires, in the worst sense of the word ... but they look just like us."

At that point he seemed to realize to whom he was talking. He stopped what he was doing and swung around and stared at Hanardy.

He said at last very slowly, "Steve, don't repeat everything you hear around this place. The universe is a bigger territory than you might think but people will ridicule if you try to tell them. They will say you're crazy."

Hanardy did not move. He was thinking: "He just don't realize. I gotta know. All this stuff happening--"

But the idea of not telling was easy to grasp. At Space-port, on the moon, Europa, at the bars that he frequented, he was accepted by certain hangers-on as a boon companion. Some of the people were sharp, even educated, but they were cynical, and often witty, and were particularly scathing of serious ideas.

Hanardy visualized himself telling any one of them that there was more to space than the solar system--more life, more intelligence--and he could imagine the ridiculing discussion that would begin.

Though they usually treated him with tolerance--it sure wouldn't do any good to tell them.

Hanardy started for the door. "I gotta know," he thought again. "And right now I'd better get on my ship and beat it before that Dreegh comes along pretending that he's Pat's future husband."

And he'd better leave on the sly. The professor and the girl wouldn't like him to go away now. But defending this meteorite was their job, not his. They couldn't expect him to deal with the Dreegh who had captured, and murdered, Pat's boy friend.

Hanardy stopped in the doorway, and felt blank. "Huh!" he said aloud.

He thought: Maybe I should tell them. They won't be able to deal with the Dreegh if they think he's somebody else.

"Steve!" It was Professor Ungarn.

Hanardy turned. "Yeah, boss?" he began.

"Finish unloading your cargo."

"Okay, boss."

He walked off heavily along the corridor, tired and glad that he had been told to go and relieved that the decision to tell them could not be put into effect immediately. He thought wearily: First thing I'd better do is take a nap.

### 3

Hanardy walked slowly up the ramp into his own ship, and so to his own cabin. Before lying down for the sleep he needed, he paused to stare at his reflection in the mirror-bright metal wall of the room. He saw a short, muscular man in greasy, gray dungarees, and a dirty yellow shirt. A stubble of beard emphasized a coarseness of features that he had seen before, but somehow ever so clearly, never with such a conviction that he was a low-grade human being. Hanardy groaned and stretched out in the bunk. He thought: I sure got my eyes open all of a sudden to what kind of a lug I am.

He took a quick look back along the track of years, and groaned again. It was a picture of a man who had down-graded himself as a human being, seeking escape in a lonely space job from the need to compete as an individual.

"Nobody will believe a word I say," he thought. "All that other junk was only in my noodle--it didn't

happen out where you could prove anything. I'd better just keep my mouth shut and stop thinking I understand what's going on."

He closed his eyes--and looked with a clear inner vision at the universe.

He opened his eyes to realize that he had slept.

He realized something else. The screens were down; a Dreegh in a spaceboat was coming into an airlock at the extreme lower side of the meteorite.

The vampire was primarily intent on information, but he would destroy everyone in the meteorite as soon as he felt it was safe.

Sweating, Hanardy tumbled out of the bunk and hurried out of his ship, and so into the meteorite. He raced along the corridor that led to the other airlock. At the entrance he met the professor and Patricia. They were smiling and excited.

The scientist said, "Great news, Steve. Pat's fiancé has just arrived. He's here sooner than we expected; but we were getting worried that we hadn't received some communication."

Hanardy muttered something, feeling immensely foolish. To have been so wrong! To have thought: Dreegh!--when the reality was--Klugg ... the girl's long-awaited fiancé, Thadled Madro.

But the identification of the new arrival made all his fantasies just that--unreal vaporings, figments of an un-settled mind.

Hanardy watched gloomily as Madro came down the ramp from the lifeboat. The girl's lover was a very tall, slim man in his thirties, with deep-set eyes. He had an intensity about him that was impressive, commanding--and repellent. Instantly repellent.

Hanardy realized ruefully that his reaction was over-critical. Hanardy couldn't decide what had twisted this man. But he was reminded of the degraded people who were his principal buddies at Spaceport, on Europa. Smart, many of them were--almost too smart. But they gave off this same emanation of an overloaded personality.

Hanardy was a little surprised to realize that the girl was not rushing forward to greet the gaunt-bodied visitor. It was Professor Ungarn who approached the man and bowed courteously. Madro bowed in return and then stood stiffly near Hanardy. The scientist glanced at his daughter and then smiled at the newcomer apologetically. He said, "Thadled Madro, this is my daughter, Patricia--who has suddenly become very shy."

Madro bowed. Patricia inclined her head. Her father turned to her, and said, "My dear, I realize that this is an unfortunate way of marrying and giving in marriage--to entrust yourself to a man whom neither of us has ever seen before. But let us remember his courage in coming here at all and resolve to offer him communication and the opportunity to show us what he is."

Madro bowed to the girl. "On those terms, I greet you, Patricia." He straightened. "About communication--I am baffled by the message I received *en route*. Will you please give me further information?"

Professor Ungarn told him of the Dreegh attack and of its abrupt cessation; he told him of William Leigh, the Great Galactic. He finished: "We have our report as to what happened from a member of the race of this system--who was somehow infected by the mere presence of this mighty being, and who apparently acquired the ability to see at a distance, and to be aware of some of the thoughts of some people, temporarily at least."

There was a faint smile on Ungarn's tired face. Hanardy shriveled a little inside, feeling that he was being made fun of. He looked unhappily at the girl. She must have told her father what he had said.

Patricia Ungarn caught his gaze on her and shrugged. "You said it, Steve," she stated matter-of-factly. "Why not tell us everything you felt?"

The newcomer stared somberly and intently at Hanardy; so intently that it was almost as if he also were reading minds. He turned slowly to the girl. "Can you give me a swift summary?" he asked. "If there's action to be taken, I'd like to have some basis for it."

There was a hard note in his voice that chilled Hanardy, who had been thinking for many minutes over and over: *They don't really know him! They don't know him.* ... He had a mental picture of the real

Madro's ship being intercepted, Madro captured and drained of information and then murdered by the vampire method. The rest was skillful makeup, good enough apparently to pass the inspection of the professor and his perceptive daughter. Which meant that, before killing the real Madro, the Dreegh had learned passwords, secret codes and enough back history to be convincing.

Within minutes, this creature could decide that it was safe to take action.

Hanardy had no illusions, no hope. It had taken an un-bounded being to defeat these mighty Dreeghs. And now, by a trick, a late arrival had achieved what his fellows *en masse* had not been able to do--he had gotten into the meteorite fortress of the galactic watcher of the solar system; and his whole manner indicated that his fears had nothing to do with either the professor or his daughter, or Hanardy.

He wanted to know what had happened. For a little while he might be forbearing, in the belief that he could learn more as an apparent ally than as a revealed enemy.

"We have to put him off," Hanardy thought in agony. "We have to hold back, or maybe give him what he wants." Somehow, the latter seemed preferable.

He grew aware that the girl was talking. While Hanardy listened, she gave the essential picture of what he had said. It was all there, surprisingly sharp in detail. It even penetra- ted some of the blur that had settled over his own memory.

When she had finished, Madro frowned and nodded. His slim body seemed unnaturally tense. He said, almost to himself: "So they were almost all captured--" He paused and, turning, looked at Hanardy. "You have the feeling there will be one more ship?"

Hanardy nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"How many Dreeghs are there aboard this one ship?" Madro asked.

This time there was no escaping a verbal reply. "Nine," said Hanardy.

He hadn't thought about the exact number before. But he knew the figure was correct. Just for a moment, he *knew* it.

Madro said in an odd tone, "You get it that clearly? Then you must already know many other things as well."

His dark eyes gazed directly into Hanardy's. The un-spoken meaning that was in them seemed to be: "Then you already know who I am?"

There was such a hypnotic quality in the other's look that Hanardy had to wage an inner fight against admitting that he knew.

Madro spoke again. "Were these--this first group of Dreeghs--all killed?"

"Why, I--" Hanardy stopped, amazed. "Gee, I don't know. I don't know what happened to them. But he intended to kill them; up to a certain moment, he intended to; and then--"

"And then what, Steve?" That was Pat, her voice urging him.

"I don't know. He noticed something."

"Who noticed something?" asked Pat.

"Leigh. You know--him. But I don't know what he did after that."

"But where could they be now?" the girl asked, be-wildered.

Hanardy remained blank, vaguely guilty, as if somehow he was failing her by not knowing.

He grew aware that Madro was turning away. "There is apparently more to discover here," the Dreegh said quietly. "It is evident that we must re-assess our entire situation; and I might even guess that we Kluggs could through the chance perceptive stimulation of this man achieve so great a know-ledge of the universe that, here and now, we might be able to take the next step of development for our kind."

The comment seemed to indicate that the Dreegh was still undecided. Hanardy followed along behind the others. For a few desperate seconds he thought of jerking out his gun, in the hope that he might be able to fire before the Dreegh could defend himself.

But already doubt was upon him. For this suspicion was just in his head. He had no proof other than the steady stream of pictures in his mind; and that was like a madness having no relation to anything that had been said and done before his eyes. Crazy people might act on such inner pic- tures, but not stolid, unimaginative Steve Hanardy.

“Gotta keep my feet on the ground!” Hanardy muttered to himself.

Ahead, Professor Ungarn said in a conversational voice: “I’ve got to give you credit, Thadled. You have already said something that has shocked Pat and myself. You have used the hateful word ‘Klugg’ just as if it doesn’t bother you.”

“It’s just a word,” said Madro.

And that was all that was said while they walked. They came to the power room. The girl sank into a chair, while her father and the visitor walked over to the power control board. “The screens are working beautifully,” said Professor Ungarn with satisfaction. “I just opened them for the few seconds it took for you to get through them. We’ve got time to decide what to do, in case this last Dreegh ship attacks us.”

Madro walked over near the girl, and settled into a chair. He addressed Professor Ungarn, “What you said a moment ago, about the word and the identification of Klugg--you’re right. It doesn’t bother me.”

The scientist said grimly, “Aren’t you fooling yourself a little? Of all the races that know of the galactic civilization, we’re the lowest on the scale. We do the hard work. We’re like the day laborers on planets such as Earth. Why, when Pat found out, she nearly went mad with self-negation. Galactic morons!” He shuddered.

Madro laughed in a relaxed way; and Hanardy had to admire the easiness of him. If Madro was a Dreegh, then for all Madro knew this, also, was a trap set by the Great Galactic; and yet he seemed unworried. If, on the other hand, he was actually a Klugg, then somehow he had made inferiority right within himself. “I could use some of that,” Hanardy thought gloomily. “If these guys are galactic morons, what does that make me?”

Madro was speaking: “We’re what we are,” he said simply. “It’s not really a matter of too much difference in intelligence. It’s an energy difference. There’s a way here, some-where, of utilizing energy in a very superior fashion. But you’ve got to have the energy, and you’ve got to get it from somewhere. That’s what makes the case of this fellow Leigh interesting. If we could backtrack on what he did here, we might really get at the heart of a lot of things.”

Patricia and her father said nothing. But their eyes glistered, as they waited for the man to continue. Madro turned to Hanardy. “That question she asked you before”--he indicated the girl--“when you first untied her. How did *he* leave the solar system after capturing those--Dreeghs?” He hesitated the slightest bit before using the name.

Hanardy said simply, “He didn’t exactly leave. It’s more like ... he *was* somewhere else. And he took them with him.” He fumbled for words. “You see, things aren’t the way they seem. They’re--” He stopped, unhappy.

He realized that the two men and the girl were waiting. Hanardy waved his arms aimlessly, indicating things beyond the safeguarding of the meteorite. “All that--that’s not real.”

Madro turned towards his companions. “It’s the concept of a universe of illusion. An old idea; but maybe we should take another look at it.”

Professor Ungarn murmured, “It would take complex techniques to make it work.”

Hanardy said, straining for meaning, “You just keep putting it out there. As if you’re doing it, even though you’re not. That tunes you in.”

“Put what out, Steve?” It was the girl, her voice as strained as his.

“The world. The universe ... the whole deal.”

“Oh!”

Hanardy went on, “And then, for a moment, you don’t put anything there. That’s when you do something I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?” The girl’s voice, almost emotionless, led him forward.

“You stop everything,” said Hanardy wonderingly. “You let the nothingness rush in. And then--you become the real you ... for as long as you have energy.”

He stared at the three people, through them, unseeing. As from a distance, Madro’s voice came to him:

“You see--it’s a matter of energy,” the man said calmly. “Hanardy?”

He came back into the room, mentally as well as physi-cally. "Yeah?"

"Where did he get his energy?" Madro asked.

"Uh," said Hanardy, "he got most of it out where it was stored--a kind of dark room."

It was a new thought; a picture came with it of how the energy had been put there by somebody else, not by Leigh. Before Hanardy could speak another word, Madro was over there beside him.

"Show us!" he said, and his voice was like a fire, burning a path of action, demanding counter-action.

Hanardy led the way, his heavy body trembling. He had the feeling that he had made an admission that spelled victory for the Dreegh. But there was no turning back. If this creature was a Dreegh, then resistance was useless. He knew that intuitively.

"If I could only be sure," Hanardy thought miserably.

And the stupid thing was that he *was* sure. As sure, it seemed to him, as he could ever be. But he wasn't sure enough even to make the attempt to save his own life. As things stood, he'd have to go through with this farce until the Dreegh--satisfied that all was well--destroyed them all in his own good time.

#### 4

It was twenty minutes later.

... After they had found the little black room to be merely a drab closet where the professor had always kept certain tools, but otherwise empty.

"Where was it stored?" Madro demanded of Hanardy. "I mean the energy that Leigh got."

Hanardy pointed unhappily at the metal wall inside the closet.

"Are you saying the energy was *in* the wall?"

The question once more disturbed Hanardy's sense of the reality of his own thoughts, and so he simply stood there, shaken, as Pat and Professor Ungarn pressed forward and with a portable instrument tested the wall.

Madro did not join them, nor did he again look into the little room. Hanardy felt an inner tremor as the Dreegh, ignoring what the father and daughter were doing, turned and strode toward him.

"Steve," he said, "I want to talk to you."

He glanced back, raised his voice, "I'm going to take Hanardy for a little private questioning."

"All right!" That was Pat. But neither she nor her father turned. Madro had not waited. His fingers gripped Hanardy's arm firmly at the elbow. Shrinking, Hanardy realized the other's intent.

A test!

To determine how vulnerable he was.

To the death--if he were that weak.

Even as Hanardy had these awarenesses, Madro drew him away from the storeroom and around a corner. Hanardy kept looking back, not daring to call for help but yet hoping that the professor and his daughter would be motivated to follow.

His final view of them showed them still inside the closet, and the professor was saying, "A series of tests on this wall should--"

Hanardy wondered what they would think when they found him gone--and dead.

Madro drew Hanardy along the side corridor and into a room. He closed the door, and they were alone. Hanardy still not resisting.

Madro stood there for a few moments, tall, lean, smiling.

"Let's settle this once and for all," he said softly. "Myself--against whatever ability you were endowed with."

And because Hanardy had begun to have fantasies, had nurtured a tiny hope that maybe it was true, that maybe something great *had* rubbed off on him--as Professor Ungarn had implied--for a few seconds, Hanardy actually waited for that something inside him to handle this situation.

That was all the time he had--seconds. The speed of Madro's attack, and the total violent intent of it,

instantly defeated that waiting reaction.

He was lifted effortlessly, grabbed by one foot, held like a rag doll, and incredibly was about to have his head dashed against the near wall--when, with a primitive survival spasm of effort, Hanardy kicked with his other foot, kicked hard against the wrist of the hand by which Madro held him.

For that moment, for that one attack, it was resistance enough. The Dreegh let him go. Hanardy fell--the slow-motion fall of less than Earth gravity. Far too slow for the speed of Madro's second attack.

In his awkward, muscle-bound way, only one of Hanardy's dragging legs actually struck the floor. The next moment he was caught again by fingers that were like granite biting into his clothes and body--Madro obviously neither heeding nor caring which.

And there was no longer any doubt in Hanardy's mind. He had no special ability by which he might defeat the Dreegh's deadly intent.

He had no inner resources. No visions. He was helpless. His hard muscles were like putty in the steely grip of a man whose strength overwhelmingly transcended his own.

Hanardy ceased his writhings and yelled desperately, "For Pete's sake, why all this murder when there's only five women Dreeghs and four men left? Why don't you Dreeghs change, try once more to become normal?"

As swiftly as it had started, the violence ended.

Madro let him go, stepped back and stared at him. "A message!" he said. "So that's your role."

Hanardy did not immediately realize that the threat was ended. He had fallen to the floor. From that begging position he continued his appeal. "You don't have to kill me! I'll keep my mouth shut. Who'd believe me, anyway?"

"What's normal?" The Dreegh's voice was cold and demanding. The radiation from him--uncleanness--was stronger.

"Me," said Hanardy.

"You!" Incredulous tone.

"Yeah, me." Hanardy spoke urgently. "What ails me is that I'm a low-lifer, somehow. But I'm a normal lug. Things balance out in me--that's the key. I take a drink, but not because I have to. It doesn't affect me particularly. When I was in my teens once I tried taking drugs. Hell, I just felt it didn't fit in my body. I just threw it off. That's normal. You can't do that with what *you've* got."

"What's normal?" Madro was cold, steady, remote.

"You're sick," said Hanardy. "All that blood and life energy. It's abnormal. Not really necessary. You can be cured."

Having spoken the strange words, Hanardy realized their strangeness. He blinked.

"I didn't know I was going to say that," he mumbled.

The Dreegh's expression was changing as he listened. Suddenly he nodded and said aloud, "I actually believe we've been given a communication from the Great Galactic. A twelfth-hour, last-chance offer."

"What will you do with me?" Hanardy mumbled.

"The question," came the steely reply, "is what is the best way to neutralize you? I choose this way!"

A metallic something glittered in the Dreegh's hand. From its muzzle a shimmering line of light reached toward Hanardy's head.

The spaceman flinched, tried to duck, had the cringing thought that this was death and stood there expecting at the very least a terrible shock.

He felt nothing. The light hit his face; and it was as if a pencil beam from a bright flashlight had briefly glared into his eyes. Then the light went, and there he stood blinking a little, but unhurt so far as he could determine.

He was still standing there when the Dreegh said, "What you and I are going to do now is that you're going to come with me and show me all the places on this meteorite where there are armaments or small arms of any kind."

Hanardy walked ahead, kept glancing back; and there, each time he looked, was the long body with its

grim face.

The resemblance to Thadled Madro was visibly fading, as if the other had actually twisted his features into a duplication of the young male Klugg's face, not using makeup at all, and now he was relaxing.

They came to where the Ungarns waited. Father and daughter said nothing at all. To Hanardy they seemed subdued; the girl was strangely pale. He thought: "They *do* know!"

The overt revelation came as the four of them arrived in the main living quarters. Professor Ungarn sighed, turned and--ignoring Hanardy--said, "Well, Mr. Dreegh, my daughter and I are wondering why the delay in our execution?"

"Hanardy!" was the reply.

Having uttered the name, as if Hanardy himself were not present, the Dreegh stood for a long moment, eyes narrowed, lips slightly parted, even white teeth clamped together. The result was a kind of a snarling smile.

"He seems to be under your control. Is he?" That was Pat Ungarn, in a small voice. The moment she had spoken, and thus attracted the Dreegh's attention, she shrank, actually retreated a few steps, as he looked at her.

Sween-Madro's tense body relaxed. But his smile was as grim as ever. And still he ignored Hanardy's presence.

"I gave Steve a special type of energy charge that will nullify for the time being what was done to him."

Professor Ungarn laughed curtly. "Do you really believe that you can defeat this--this being--William Leigh ... defeat him with what you have done to Steve? After all, he's your real opponent, not Hanardy. This is a shadow battle. One of the fighters has left a puppet to strike his blows for him."

Sween-Madro said in an even tone, "It's not as dangerous as it seems. Puppets are notoriously poor fighters."

The professor argued, "Any individual of the race known to lesser races as Great Galactics--which was obviously not their real name--must be presumed to have taken all such possibilities into account. What can you gain by delay?"

Sween-Madro hesitated, then: "Steve mentioned a possible cure for our condition." His voice held an edge in it.

There was a sudden silence. It settled over the room and seemed to permeate the four people in it.

The soundless time was broken by a curt laugh from Sween-Madro. He said, "I sensed that for a few seconds I seemed--"

"Human," said Pat Ungarn. "As if you had feelings and hopes and desires like us."

"Don't count on it." The Dreegh's voice was harsh.

Professor Ungarn said slowly, "I suspect that you analyzed Steve has a memory of mental contact with a supreme, perhaps even an ultimate, intelligence. Now, these earth people when awake are in that peculiar, perennially confused state that makes them unacceptable for galactic citizenship. So that the very best way to defend yourself from Steve's memory is to keep him awake. I therefore deduce that the energy charge you fired at him was designed to maintain in continuous stimulation the waking center in the brain stem.

"But that is only a temporary defense. In four or five days, exhaustion in Hanardy would reach an extreme state, and something in the body would have to give. What will you have then that you don't have now?"

The Dreegh seemed surprisingly willing to answer, as if by uttering his explanations aloud he could listen to them himself, and so judge them.

He said, "My colleagues will have arrived by then."

"So then you're all in the trap," said Professor Ungarn. "I think your safest bet would be to kill Pat and me right now. As for Steve--"

Hanardy had been listening to the interchange with a growing conviction that this melancholy old man was arguing them all into being immediately executed.

"Hey!" he interrupted urgently. "What are you trying to do?"

The scientist waved at him impatiently. "Shut up, Steve. Surely you realize that this Dreegh will kill



without mercy. I'm trying to find out why he's holding off. It doesn't fit with what I consider to be good sense."

He broke off, "Don't worry about him killing you. He doesn't dare. You're safe."

Hanardy felt extremely unsafe. Nevertheless, he had a long history of accepting orders from this man; so he remained dutifully silent.

The Dreegh, who had listened to the brief interchange thoughtfully, said in an even tone that when his companions arrived, he, Hanardy and Pat Ungarn would go to Europa. He believed Pat was needed on such a journey. So no one would be killed until it was over.

"I'm remembering," Sween-Madro continued, "what Steve said about the Great Galactic noticing something. I deduce that what he noticed had to do with Steve himself. So we'll go to Spaceport and study Steve's past behavior there. Right now, let's disarm the entire place for my peace of mind."

Clearly, it would not be for anyone else's.

From room to room, and along each corridor, silently the three prisoners accompanied their powerful conqueror.

And presently every weapon in the meteorite was neutralized or disposed of. Even energy sources that might be converted were sealed off. Thus, the meteorite screens were actually de-energized and the machinery to operate them, wrecked.

The Dreegh next cut off escape possibilities by dismantling several tiny space boats. The last place they went, first Hanardy, then the professor, then Pat, and finally Sween-Madro, was Hanardy's space freighter. There also, all the weapons were eliminated, and the Dreegh had Hanardy dismantle the control board. From the parts that were presently lying over the floor, the gaunt man, with unerring understanding, selected key items. With these in hand, he paused in the doorway. His baleful gaze caught Hanardy's shifting eyes. "Steve!" he said. "You'll stay right here."

"You mean, inside my ship?"..

"Yes. If you leave here for any reason, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

Hanardy glanced helplessly toward Professor Ungarn and then back at the Dreegh. He said, "There's some work the professor wanted me to do."

"Professor Ungarn,"--it was the vampire's harsh voice cutting across Hanardy's uncertain protest--"tell him how unimportant such work is."

Hanardy was briefly aware of the old man's wan smile. The scientist said wearily, "Pat and I will be killed as soon as we have served our purpose. What he will eventually do with you, we don't know."

"So you'll stay right here. You two come with me," Sween-Madro ordered the professor and his daughter.

They went as silently as they had come. The airlock door clanged. Hanardy could hear the interlocking steel bolts wheeze into position. After that, no sound came.

The potentially most intelligent man in the solar system was alone--and wide awake.

## 5

Sitting, or lying down, waiting posed no problems for Hanardy. His years alone in space had prepared him for the ordeal that now began. There was a difference.

As he presently discovered when he lay down on his narrow cot, he couldn't sleep.

Twenty-four earth hours ticked by.

Not a thinking man, Steve Hanardy; nor a reader. The four books on board were repair manuals. He had thumbed through them a hundred times, but now he got them out and examined them again. Every page was, as he had expected, dully familiar. After a slow hour he used up their possibilities.

Another day, and still he was wide-eyed and unsleeping, but there was a developing restlessness in him, and exhaustion.

As a spaceman, Hanardy had received indoctrination in the dangers of sleeplessness. He knew of the mind's tendency to dream while awake, the hallucinatory experiences, the normal effects of the unending

strain of wakefulness.

Nothing like that happened.

He did not know that the sleep center in his brain was timelessly depressed and the wake center timelessly stimulated. The former could not turn on, the latter could not turn off. So between them there could be none of the usual inter-play with its twilight states.

But he could become more exhausted.

Though he was lying down almost continuously now, he became continually more exhausted.

On the fourth "morning" he had the thought for the first time: this is going to drive me crazy!

Such a fear had never before in his whole life passed through his mind. By late afternoon of that day, Hanardy was scared and dizzy and hopeless, in a severe dwindling spiral of decreasing sanity. What he would have done had he remained alone was not at that time brought to a test.

For late on that fourth "day" Pat Ungarn came through the airlock, found him cowering in his bunk and said, "Steve, come with me. It's time we took action."

Hanardy stumbled to his feet. He was actually heading after her when he remembered Sween-Madro's orders to him, and he stopped,

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

He mumbled simply, "He told me not to leave my ship. He'll kill me if I do."

The girl was instantly impatient. "Steve, stop this non-sense." Her sharp words were like blows striking his mind. "You haven't any more to lose than we have. So come along!"

And she started back through the airlock. Hanardy stood, stunned and shaking. In a single sentence, spoken in her preemptory fashion, she challenged his manhood by implication, recognized that the dumb love he felt for her made him her slave and so re-established her absolute ascendancy.

Silently, tensely, he shuffled across the metal floor of the airlock and moments later was in the forbidden meteorite.

Feeling doomed.

The girl led the way to what was, in effect, the engine room of the meteorite.

As Steve trailed reluctantly behind her, Professor Ungarn rose up from a chair and came forward, smiling his infinitely tired smile.

His greeting was, "Pat wants to tell you about intelligence. Do you know what your I.Q. is?"

The question barely reached the outer ramparts of Hanardy's attention. Following the girl along one corridor after another, a fearful vision had been in his mind, of Sween-Madro suddenly rounding the next corner and striking him dead. That vision remained, but along with it was a growing wonder: *Where* was the Dreegh?

The professor snapped, "Steve do you hear me?"

Forced to look at him, Hanardy was able to remember proudly that he belonged in the 55th percentile of the human race, intelligence-wise, and that his I.Q. had been tested at 104.

"The tester told me that I was above average," Hanardy said in a tone of pleasure. Then, apologetic again, he added, "Of course, beside you guys I'm nothing."

The old man said, "On the Klugg I.Q. scale you would probably rate higher than 104. We take into account more factors. Your mechanical ability and spatial relations skill would not be tested correctly by any human I.Q. test that I have examined."

He continued, "Now, Steve, I'm trying to explain this all to you in a great hurry, because some time in the next week you're going to be, in flashes, the most intelligent man in the entire solar system, and there's nothing anybody can do about it except help you use it. I want to prepare you."

Hanardy, who had anxiously stationed himself so that he could keep one eye on the open door--and who kept expecting the mighty Dreegh to walk in on the little conspiratorial group of lesser beings--shook his head hopelessly.

"You don't know what's already happened. I can be killed. Easy. I've got no defenses."

He glumly described his encounter with the Dreegh and told how helpless he had been. "There I was on my knees, begging, until I just happened to say something that made him stop. Boy, *he* sure didn't

think I was unkillable.”

Pat came forward, stood in front of him, and grabbed his shoulders with both hands.

“Steve,” she said in an urgent voice, “above a certain point of I.Q. mind actually is *over* matter. A being above that intelligence level cannot be, killed. Not by bullets, nor by any circumstance involving matter. Now listen: in you is a memory of such an intelligence level. In manhandling you, the Dreegh was trying to see what limited stress would do. He found out. He got the message from the Great Galactic out of you.

“Steve, after that he didn’t *dare* put a bullet into you, or fire a death-level energy beam. Because that would force this memory to the surface!”

In her intense purposefulness she tried to move him with her hands. But that only made Hanardy aware of what a girlish body she had. So little body, so much imperious woman--it startled him for she could barely budge him, let alone shake him.

She said breathlessly, “Don’t you see, Steve? You’re going to be king! Try to act accordingly.”

“Look--” Hanardy began, stolidly.

Rage flashed into her face. Her voice leaped past his inter-jection. “And if you don’t stop all this resistance, in the final issue *I’ll* put a bullet into your brain myself, and then you’ll see.”

Hanardy gazed into her blue eyes, so abruptly furious. He had a sinking conviction that she would do exactly what she threatened. In alarm, he said, “For Pete’s sake, what do you want me to do?”

“Listen to what dad has to say!” she commanded. “And stop looking the other way. You need a high-speed educa-tion, and we haven’t got much time.”

That last seemed like a total understatement to Hanardy. His feeling was that he had no time at all.

Awareness saved him, then. There was the room with its machinery, and the old man and his daughter; and there was he with his mind jumping with the new fear of her threat. Hanardy had a flitting picture of the three of them lost forever inside this remote meteorite that was just one tiny part of Jupiter’s colossal family of small, speeding particles of matter--a meaningless universe that visibly had no morality or justice, because it included without a qualm, creatures like the Dreeghs.

As his skittering thought reached that dark depth, it suddenly occurred to Hanardy that Pat couldn’t shoot him. She didn’t have a gun. He opened his mouth to tell her of her helplessness. Then closed it again.

Because an opportunity might open up for her to obtain a weapon. So the threat remained, receded in time ... but not to be dismissed. Nonetheless, he grew calmer. He still felt compelled, and jittery. But he stayed there and listened, then, to a tiny summary of the story of human intelligence and the attempts that had been made to measure it.

It seemed human intelligence tests were based on a curve where the average was 100. Each test Professor Ungam had seen revealed an uncertainty about what constituted an intelligence factor, and what did not. Was the ability to tell left from right important to intelligence? One test included it. Should an individual be able to solve brain twisters? Many testers considered this trait of great importance. And almost all psychologists insisted on a subtle understanding of the meaning of words and many of them. Skill at arith-metic was a universal requirement. Quick observation of a variety of geometric shapes and forms was included. Even a general knowledge of world conditions and history was a requirement in a few tests.

“Now, we Kluggs,” continued the professor in his melan-choly voice, “have gone a step beyond that.”

The words droned on through Hanardy’s mind. Kluggs were theory-operating people ... theories based on primary and not secondary abilities. Another race, “higher” than the Kluggs--called the Lennels--operated on Certainty ... a high harmonic of Authority.

“Certainty, with the Lennels,” said the old man, “is of course a system and not an open channel. But even so it makes them as powerful as the Dreeghs.”

On an I.Q. curve that would include humans, Kluggs, Lennels and Dreeghs, the respective averages would be 100, 220, 380, and 450. The Dreeghs had an open channel on control of physical movement.

“Even a Great Galactic can only move as fast as--he cannot move faster than--a Dreegh,” Professor Ungarn commented and explained. “Such open channels are path-ways in the individual to a much greater ability than his standard I.Q. permits.”

Musical, mathematical, artistic, or any special physical, mental or emotional ability was an open channel that opera-ated outside the normal human, Klugg, or even the Dreegh curve. By definition, a Great Galactic was a person whose I.Q. curve included only open channels.

It had been reported that the open channel curve began at about 80. And, though no one among the lesser races had ever seen anything higher than 3,000--the limits of the space phenomenon--it was believed that the Great Galactic I.Q. curve ascended by types to about 10,000.

“It is impossible,” said the Professor’s melancholy voice, “to imagine what kind of an open channel that would be. An example of an 800 open channel is Pat. She can deceive. She can get away with a sleight of hand, a feint, a diver-sion--”

The old man stopped suddenly. His gaze flicked past Hanardy’s right shoulder and fastened on something behind him that Hanardy couldn’t see.

## 6

The spaceman froze with the sudden terrified conviction that the worst had happened, and that the Dreegh Sween-Madro was behind him.

But it couldn’t be, lie realized. Professor Ungarn was looking at the control board of the meteorite. There was no door there.

Hanardy allowed himself to turn around. He saw that on the big instrument panel a viewplate had lighted, showing a scene of space.

It was a familiar part of the starry heavens looking out toward interstellar space, away from the sun. Near the center of the scene a light was blinking.

Even as Hanardy watched, the viewplate picture shifted slightly, centering exactly on the blinking light.

Behind Hanardy, there was a gasp from the girl, “Dad,” she whispered, “is it--?”

Professor Ungarn had walked toward the viewplate, past Hanardy and so into the latter’s range of vision. The old man nodded with an air of utter weariness.

“Yes, I’m afraid it is, my dear. The other eight Dreeghs have arrived.”

He glanced hopelessly at Hanardy. “My daughter had some kind of idea of using you against Sween-Madro before they got here.”

Hanardy said blankly, “Using *me*?”

The meaning of that brought him with ajar out of his own body exhaustion.

The old man was shrugging. “Whatever the merit of her plan, of course, now it’s too late.”

He finished dully, “Now we’ll learn our fate.”

The tableau of dejection held for seconds only. A sound, a high-pitched human voice, broke through the silence and the dark emotion that filled the room.

“How far away are they?” It was the girl’s voice, from behind Hanardy, strained but recognizable. “Exactly how long till they get here?”

Hanardy’s mind stirred from its thrall as Professor Ungarn said dully, “Less than two hours would be my guess. Notice--”

He thereupon started a technical comment to her about the speed with which the viewplate had centered on the ship, implying--he said--the enormous velocity of its approach.

His explanation was never completed. In the middle of it, the girl uttered a screech and then, to Hanardy’s amaze-ment, she raced past him and flung herself, arms flailing, at the old man.

She kept striking at his face then, yelling the most blood-curdling curses in a furious soprano voice. A long moment went by before Hanardy was able to make out what she was saying:

“--You stupid old man! What do you mean, only two hours? Two hours is all we need, *damn* you!”

At that point Hanardy emerged from his surprise. Awk-wardly, he jumped over her, grabbed her, pulled

her away. "For Pete's sake!" he cried.

The girl tried to turn on him, her struggling body writhing in his grip. But he held her, uttering apologies the while. Finally, she realized that his strength was too much for her. She ceased her efforts, and with an attempt at control said grimly, "Steve, this crazy old fool who is my father has twice now accepted defeat--when it wasn't necessary!"

She broke off, addressed the old man. Her voice went up a whole octave as she said, "Show Steve what you showed me only a few minutes before I went to get him."

Professor Ungarn was white and haggard. "I'm sorry, my dear," he mumbled. He nodded to Hanardy. "I'm sure you can let her go now."

Hanardy released the girl. She stood straightening her clothes, but her eyes still flashed. "Show him, damn it," she snapped, "and make it quick."

Professor Ungarn took Hanardy's arm and drew him toward the control board, speaking in apologetic tones. "I failed my daughter. But the truth is I'm over three hundred years old. That's just about it for a Klugg; so I keep for-getting how younger people might feel."

Pat--he went on--was a product of a late-life marriage. Her mother had flatly refused to go along on his assignment as a galactic watcher. In bringing the girl with him, he had hoped to shield her from the early shock of discovering that she was a member of a servant race. But isolation had not, in fact, saved her feelings. And now, their very remoteness from the safeguarding military strength of associated lower-level races had brought a horrifying threat of death from which he had decided there was no escape.

"So it didn't even occur to me to tell her--"

"Show him," the girl's voice came shrilly from the rear, "what you didn't bother to tell me."

Professor Ungarn made a few control adjustments, and there appeared on the viewplate first a picture of a room and then of a bed in one corner with an almost naked man lying on it.

The bed came into full focus, filled the viewplate. Hanardy drew in his breath with a sharp hiss of disbelief. It was the Dreegh.

The man who lay there, seemingly unconscious, bore almost no resemblance to the tall, vital being who had come aboard in the guise of Pat's fiancé. The body on the bed was un-naturally thin; the rib cage showed. His face, where it had been full-cheeked, was sunken and hollow.

"They need other people's blood and life energy to survive, and they need it almost continuously," the old man whis-pered. "That's what I wanted to show you, Steve." Her tone grew scathing, as she continued, "My father didn't let me see that until a few minutes ago. Imagine! Here we are under sentence of death, and on the day, almost on the hour that the other Dreeghs are due to arrive, he finally reveals it--something he had watched developing for days."

The old man shut off the scene on the viewplate and sighed.

"I'm afraid it never occurred to me that a Klugg could challenge a Dreegh. Anyway, I imagine Sween-Madro originally arrived here expecting to use us as a source of blood and life force. And then when you showed all that Great Galactic programming, he changed his mind and decided to wait until the coming of his colleagues. So there he is--at our mercy, Pat thinks."

Hanardy had spent his years of association with this couple deferring to them. So he waited now, patiently, for the scientist to tell him what to do about the opportunity.

The old man said, with a sigh, "Pat thinks if we make a bold attack at this stage, we can kill him."

Hanardy was instantly skeptical, but he had never been able to influence this father and daughter in any way, and he was about to follow the old, withdrawing pattern, when he remembered again that there were no weapons around to make any kind of attack whatsoever.

He pointed out that fact and was still talking when he felt something cold touch his hand.

Startled, he glanced down and back--and saw that the girl was pushing a metal bar about one and a half feet long, at his palm. Involuntarily, still not thinking, he closed his fingers over it. As soon as he had it firmly in one chunky hand, Hanardy recognized by its feel that it was a special aluminum alloy, hard, light, and tough.

The girl spoke. "And just in case that dumb look on your face means what I think it does," she said, "here are your orders: take that bar, go where the Dreegh is and beat him to death with it."

Hanardy turned slowly, not quite sure that it was he who was being addressed. "Me?" he said. And then, after a long pause, "Hey!"

"And you'd better get started," said the girl, "there isn't much time."

"Hey!" repeated Hanardy, blankly.

## 7

Slowly, the room swung back into a kind of balance. And Hanardy grew aware that the girl was speaking again:

"I'll go in through the door facing the bed," she stated. "If he can awaken at all in his condition, I want to ask him some questions. I must know about the nature of super-intelligence."

For a brain in as dulled a state as Hanardy's, the words were confusing. He had been striving to adjust to the idea that he was the one who was supposed to go in to the Dreegh, and simultaneously he was bracing himself against what she wanted him to do.

With so many thoughts already in his mind, it was hard to get the picture that this slip of a girl intended to confront the Dreegh by herself.

Pat was speaking again, in an admonishing tone. "You stand just inside the other door, Steve. Now listen carefully. Do your best not to attract his attention, which I hope will be on me. The information I want is for your benefit. But when I yell, 'Come!' don't delay. You come and you kill, understand?"

Hanardy had had a thought of his own. A sudden stark realization. The realization was that in this deadly dangerous situation there was ultimately a solution.

He could cast off in his own spacecraft!

But that meant he would have to obtain the key equipment Sween-Madro had taken from his ship. Obtain it, repair the control board, get away!

To obtain it he'd have to go to where it was--into the Dreegh's bedroom. At least apparently, he would have to do exactly what Pat wanted.

Fear dimmed before that obvious purpose, yielded to the feeling that there was no other way.

Thinking thus, Hanardy abruptly uttered agreement. "Yep," he said, "I understand."

The girl had started toward the door. At the tone of his voice, she paused, turned back and gazed at him suspiciously. "Now, don't you go having any plans of your own!" She spoke accusingly.

Hanardy was instantly guilty, instantly confused. "For Pete's sake," he said, "I don't like what you want to do--going in there and waking this guy. I don't see any good in my listening to a lecture on intelligence. I'm not smart enough to understand it! So, my vote is if we're going in let's just kill him right off."

The girl had turned away. She did not glance back as she walked out of the room. Hanardy grimaced at Professor Ungarn. Moments later he was through the door, following her, weary, hopeless, mentally shut down, but resigned.

Pat heard him stumbling along behind her. Without looking around she said, "You're a weapon, Steve. I have to figure out how to fire that weapon and escape. Basically, that's all we need to do! Get away from the Dreeghs and hide. Understand?"

He was a man stumbling along metal and rock corridors in a remote part of the solar system, his normal stolidness made worse now by an immense weariness. So he heard the words she uttered; even understood their surface meaning.

It was enough awareness for him to be able to mumble, "Yeah--yeah!"

Otherwise--she went on when he had acknowledged--he might go off like a firecracker, discharging whatever energy *homo-galactic* had endowed him with in a series of meaningless explosions aimed at nothing and accomplishing nothing.

So the question was: What kind of weapon was he?

"As I see it," she finished, "that information we can only hope to gain from the Dreegh. That's why we

have to talk to him.”

“Yeah,” mumbled Hanardy, hoarsely. “Yeah.”

They came all too quickly to their destination. At the girl’s nod Hanardy broke into an uneven lope and ran around to the far corridor. He fumbled the door open and stepped inside.

At this point Pat had already been through her door for fifteen seconds. Hanardy entered upon a strange scene, indeed.

On the bed, the almost naked body was stirring. The eyes opened and stared at the girl, and she said breathlessly, “That! What you just now did--becoming aware of me. How do you do that?”

From where he stood, Hanardy could not see the Dreegh’s head. He was aware only that the Dreegh did not answer.

“What,” asked Pat Ungarn, “is the nature of the intelligence of a Great Galactic?”

The Dreegh spoke. “Pat,” he said, “you have no future, so why are you making this inquiry?”

“I have a few days.”

“True,” said Sween-Madro.

He seemed unaware that there was a second person in the room. *So he can’t read minds!* Hanardy exulted. For the first time he had hope.

“I have a feeling,” Pat was continuing, “that you’re at least slightly vulnerable in your present condition. So answer my question! Or--”

She left the threat and the sentence unfinished.

Again the body on the bed shifted position. Then:

“All right, my dear, if it’s information you want, I’ll give you more than you bargained for.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are no Great Galáctica,” said the Dreegh. “No such beings exist, as a race. To ask about their intelligence is--not meaningless, but complex.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Pat’s tone was scathing. “We saw him!”

She half-glanced at Hanardy for confirmation, and Hanardy found himself nodding his head in full agreement with her words. Boy, *he* sure knew there was a Great Galactic.

On the bed, Sween-Madro sat up.

“The Great Galactic is a sport! Just a member of some lesser race who was released by a chance stimulus so that he temporarily became a super-being. The method?” The Dreegh smiled coldly. “Every once in a while, accidentally, enough energy accumulates to make such a stimulus possible. The lucky individual, in his super-state, realized the whole situation. When the energy had been transformed by his own body and used up as far as he himself was concerned, he stored the transformed life-energy where it could eventually be used by someone else. The next person would be able to utilize the energy in its converted form. Having gone through the energy, each recipient in turn sank back to some lower state.

“Thus William Leigh, earth reporter, had for a few brief hours been the only Great Galactic in this area of space. By now his super-ability is gone forever. And there is no one to replace him.

“And that, of course,” said the Dreegh, “is the problem with Hanardy. To use his memory of intelligence in its full possibility, he’ll need life energy in enormous quantities. Where will he get it? He won’t! If we’re careful, and investigate his background cautiously, we should be able to prevent Steve getting to any source, known or unknown.”

Hanardy had listened to the account with a developing empty feeling from the pit of his stomach. He saw that the color had drained from the girl’s face. “I don’t believe it,” she faltered. “That’s just a--”

She got no further, because in that split instant the Dreegh was beside her. The sheer speed of his movement was amazing. Hanardy, watching, had no clear memory of the vampire actually getting off the bed.

But now, belatedly, he realized what the Dreegh’s movements on the bed must have been--maneuverings, rebalancings. The creature-man had been surprised--had been caught in a prone, helpless position, but used the talk to brace himself for attack.

Hanardy was miserably aware that Pat Ungarn was equally taken by surprise. Sween-Madro's fingers snatched at her shoulder. With effortless strength, he spun her around to face him. His lank body towered above her, as he spoke.

"Hanardy has a memory of something, Pat. That's all. *And that is all there is.* That's all that's left of the Great Galactics."

Pat gasped, "If it's nothing, why are you scared?"

"It's not quite nothing," Sween-Madro replied patiently. "There is a--potential. One chance in a million. I don't want him to have any chance to use it, though of course we'll presently have to take a chance with him and put him into a state of sleep."

He released her and stepped back. "No, no, my dear, there's no possible chance of you making use of some special ability in Hanardy--*because I know he's over there by the door.* And he can't move fast enough to get over here and hit me with that metal bar."

The tense Hanardy sagged. And Pat Ungarn seemed frozen, glaring at the creature. She came back to life, abruptly. "I know why you don't dare shoot Steve. So why don't you shoot me?" Her tone was up in pitch, challenging.

"Hey!" said Hanardy. "Careful!"

"Don't worry, Steve," she answered gaily without turning around. "It's not because I have any I.Q. potentialities. But he won't touch me either. He knows you like me. You might have a bad thought about him at a key moment, later. Isn't that right, Mr. Dreegh? I've got your little dilemma figured out, haven't I, even though I've only got a Klugg brain."

Her words seemed suicidal to Hanardy. But Sween-Madro just stood gazing at her, swaying a little, saying nothing--a naked scarecrow of a man from the waist up, and below, wearing knee-length dungarees over bone-thin legs.

Yet there was no belief in Hanardy that the Dreegh was vulnerable. He remembered the other's high speed move-ments--that seemingly instantaneous transition from one location in space to another ... from the bed to Pat, at invisible speed. Fantastic!

Once more Pat's voice broke the silence, mockingly: "What's this? An I.Q. of 400 or 500 baffled? Doesn't know what to do? Remember, no matter what action you take, he can't stay awake much longer. It's only a matter of time before something has to give."

At that point, another sharp anxiety struck through Hanardy. He thought: She's wasting time. Every minute those other Dreeghs are getting closer!

The thought was so urgent in his mind, he spoke it aloud, "For Pete's sake, Miss Pat, those other Dreeghs'll be here any second--"

"*Shut up, you fool!*"

Instantly shrill, hysterical, terrified--that was her totally unexpected reaction.

She said something else in that same high-pitched tone, but Hanardy did not hear it clearly. For in that moment between his own words and hers, the Dreegh turned. And his arm moved. That was all that was visible. Where did it move to? The super-speed of the movement blurred that. It could only, logically, have been toward the pocket of his dungarees, but nothing like that was visible.

A weapon glittered; a beam of light touched Hanardy's face.

As blackness swept over him, he realized what else it was the girl had said: "Steve, he'll put you to sleep while that thought about the Dreegh's coming quickly is in your mind. ..."

## 8

How swiftly can transition between wakefulness and sleep take place?

As long as it requires for the wakefulness center to shut off and the sleep center to turn on.

So there is no apparent conscious time lag. If you live a dull, human existence, it seems brief enough.

To Hanardy, who was normally duller than most, it seemed no time at all.

He started forward, his lips parted to speak--and he was already asleep ... so far as he--the self--was aware. He did have a vague feeling of starting to fall.



Consciously, nothing more occurred.

Below the conscious, there was a measurable lapse of time.

During that time, the particles inside the atoms of his body did millions of millions of separate actions. And molecules by the quadrillion maneuvered in the twilight zone of matter. Because of the thought that had been in Hanardy's mind, at some level of his brain he noticed exact spots of space, saw and identified the other-ness of the Dreeghs in the approaching Dreegh ship, estimated their other-where-ness, computed the mathematics of change. It was simple in the virtual emptiness of space, difficult where matter was dense. But never impossible.

As he did so, the Dreegh ship with its eight Dreeghs changed location from one spot to another exact spot in space, bridging the gap through a lattice-work of related spots.

In the bedroom in the meteorite, the visible event was that Hanardy fell. A twisting fall, it was, whereby he sprawled on his side, the arm with the metal bar in it partly under him.

As Hanardy collapsed to the floor, the Dreegh walked past Pat toward the open door behind it. Reaching it, he clutched at it, seemingly for support.

Pat stared at him. After what had happened she didn't quite dare to believe that his apparent weakness was as great as she saw it to be.

Yet after a little, she ventured, "May I ask my father a question?"

There was no answer. The Dreegh stood at the door, and he seemed to be clinging to it.

Excitement leaped through the girl.

Suddenly she dared to accept the reality of the exhaustion that was here. The Dreegh's one mighty effort had depleted him, it seemed.

She whirled and raced over to Hanardy, looking for the metal bar. She saw at once that he was lying on top of it and tried to roll him over. She couldn't. He seemed to be solidly imbedded in the floor in that awkward position.

But there was no time to waste! Breathing hard, she reached under him for the metal weapon, found it, tugged at it.

It wouldn't budge.

Pull at it, twist it, exert all her strength--it was no use. Hanardy had a vice-like grip on the bar, and his body weight reinforced that grip. Nothing she could do could move it, or him.

Pat believed the position, the immovability, was no accident. Dismayed, she thought the Dreegh caused him to fall like that.

She felt momentarily awed. What an amazing prediction ability Sween-Madro had had--to have realized the nature of the danger against him and taken an exact defense against it.

It was a maneuver designed to defeat, exactly and precisely, a small Klugg woman, whose ability at duplication could not lighten the weight of a body like Hanardy's enough to matter and whose ability to solve problems did not include the ability to unravel a muscularly knotted hand grip.

But--she was on her feet, infinitely determined--it would do him no good!

The Dreegh also had a weapon. His only hope must be that she wouldn't dare come near him.

Instants later, she was daring. Her trembling fingers fumbled over his dungarees, seeking openings.

They found nothing.

But he *had* a weapon, she told herself, bewildered. He fired it at Steve. I saw him!

Again, more frantically, she searched all the possibilities of the one garment he wore--in vain.

She remembered, finally, in her desperation, that her father must have been watching this room. He might have seen where it was.

"Dad!" she called anxiously.

"Yes, my dear?" The reply from the intercom came at once, reassuringly calm.

Watching the Dreegh warily, she asked, "Do you have any advice on how to kill him?"

The old man, sitting in the control room of the meteorite, sighed. From his viewpoint, he could on one viewplate see the girl, Hanardy's unconscious body and Sween-Madro; on another he observed gloomily that the Dreegh ship had arrived and had attached to an airlock. As he watched that second viewplate,

three men and five women came out of the ship and into a corridor of the meteorite. It was obvious that killing Sween-Madro was no longer of value.

The girl's voice cut across his awareness. "He must have used the super-speed again without my noticing and hidden his weapon. Did you see what he did with it?"

What Professor Ungarn was seeing was that the newly arrived Dreeghs, though in no hurry, were heading directly toward Madro and Pat.

Watching them, the professor thought, Pat was right. Sween-Madro had been vulnerable. He could have been killed. But it was too late.

Sick with self-recrimination he abandoned the control room and hurried to join his daughter.

By the time he arrived, Sween-Madro was back in the bed, and Hanardy had been lifted onto a powered dolly which had been wheeled alongside a machine that had evidently been brought from the Dreegh ship.

The machine was a simple device with a pair of bulbous, transparent cups and a suction system. A needle was inserted into a blood vessel on Hanardy's right arm. Swiftly, a turgid bluish-red liquid rose in one of the bulbous cups; about a quart, Professor Ungarn estimated to his daughter in a whisper.

One by one, wordlessly, the Dreeghs went to the machine. Another needle was used. And into each a tiny drain of blood siphoned from the red stuff in the bulbous cup. It seemed as if about half of it was taken.

Still without anyone speaking, the needle was inserted into Sween-Madro's arm; and the rest of the blood from the cup flowed into him.

Pat stared at the dreadful beings with avid curiosity. All her life she had heard of, and been warned against, these creatures; and here they were from all those distances of years and miles. Four men and five women.

Three of the five women were brunette, one was a blonde; the fifth was a redhead.

The women were, every one, tall and willowy. The men were uniformly six feet four or five and gaunt of build. Was height a part of the Dreegh illness? Pat wondered, seeing them together like this. Did Dreegh bones grow as a result of their disease? She could only wonder.

The figure on the bed moved. Sween-Madro opened his eyes and sat up.

He seemed shaky and unsure. Again, there was silent action. The Dreegh men did not move, but the women one by one went over and lightly kissed Sween-Madro on the lips.

At each touch of lips there was a faint bluish light, a flash of brightness, like a spark. Invariably, the blue spark leaped from the woman to the man.

And with each flash he grew more alive. His body became visibly larger. His eyes grew bright.

Pat, who had been watching with total fascination, sud-denly felt two pairs of hands grab her. She had time to let out a shriek as two Dreegh men carried her over to Sween and held her above him, her face over his.

At the final moment, she ceased her futile struggle and froze.

She was aware of Sween's sardonic eyes gazing up at her. Then, with a deliberate movement he raised his head and brushed her lips with his.

She expected to die.

Deep inside the back of her head, a fire started. The heat of it seemed instantly unbearable; instantly there was a flash of blue flame from her lips to his.

Then she was back on the floor, dizzy, but--as she realized presently--recovering. And still alive.

Sween-Madro swung his feet over the edge of the bed and said, "The existence of such brother-and-sister energy flows, Pat--which you have now experienced--and the Dreegh ability to use them make it likely that we could become the most powerful beings in the galaxy on a continuing basis. If we can defeat Hanardy. We only took about ten percent from you. We don't want you damaged--yet."

He stood up, walked over and looked down at the un-conscious spaceman. Presently he beckoned Pat and Profes-sor Ungarn; father and daughter came at once.

The Dreegh said, "I'm still not well. Can you detect any change in him?" He did not wait for a reply, but said in relief, "I guess nothing happened. He looks as low-grade a human as you could ever not want to meet or deal with in any way, and that's the way he was before--don't you agree?"

Pat said quickly, "I don't understand. What did you expect?"

"Hopefully, nothing," was the reply. "But that remark about how near our ship was the first unprogrammed use of his ability. A spatial relationship action like that comes in the Great Galactic intelligence curve at about I.Q. 1200."

"But what did you fear?" Pat persisted.

That it would feed back through his nervous system!"

"What would that do?"

The Dreegh merely stared at her, sardonically. It was Professor Ungarn's voice that finally broke the silence. "My dear, the Dreeghs are actually acting as if their only enemy is a programmed Hanardy."

"Then you believe their analysis of the nature of the Great Galactics?"

"They believe it; so I believe it."

"Then there's no hope?"

The old man pointed at Hanardy. "There's Steve."

"But he's just a bum. That's why we selected him to be our drayhorse, remember?" She spoke accusingly. "Because he was the dumbest, most honest jerk in the solar system--remember?"

The old man nodded, suddenly looking gloomy. Pat became aware that the Dreeghs were watching them, as if they were listening.

It was one of the dark-haired women who spoke. "My name is Rilke," she said. She went on, in a low, husky voice, "What you've just described--a man as unimportant as this one--is one of the reasons why we want to go to Europa. We must find out what *did* the Great Galactic see in this strange little man. We should know because for our blood storage tanks and energy pool we need the blood and life force of a million people from this otherwise undefended planetary system. And we dare not kill a single one of those million until the riddle of Hanardy is resolved."

## 9

*Take a sentient being--*

Everyone aboard the Dreegh super-ship that flew to the moon Europa in thirty hours (instead of many weeks) fitted that description: the Dreeghs, Pat, Professor Ungarn, and the sleeping Hanardy.

They had brought along Hanardy's freighter to be their landing craft. They came down without incident into Hanardy's permanent spaceship berth in Spaceport, the large moon's principal city.

*Consider any sentient person--*

That includes a man asleep ... like Hanardy.

There he lies, helpless. In that fourth sleep stage that Hanardy was in--the deep delta-wave stage--push at him, hit him, roll him over. It is enormously difficult to awaken him. Yet it is in this state that a person can act out a sleep-walker's strange goal.

*Force this sentient individual to interact with a grossly vast universe--*

"We're taking no chances," said the Dreegh brunette woman, Rilke. "We're going to bring him into motion on the somnambulistic level."

It was Sween who directed a bright light at Hanardy's face; after mere seconds, he shut it off.

There was a measurable passage of time. Then the body on the bed stirred.

A second woman--the blonde--without glancing up from the instrument she was monitoring, made a gesture and said hurriedly, "The somnambulistic purpose is in the delta-wave band C-10-13B."

It was a private nomenclature that meant nothing to Pat. But the words caused an unexpected flutter of excitement among the Dreeghs.

Sween-Madro turned to Pat. "Have you any idea why Hanardy should want to visit with, and have a feeling of affection for, thirteen people in Spaceport?"

Pat shrugged. "He associates with certain space bums around town," she said contemptuously.

“Typical hangers-on of the kind you find out in space. I wouldn’t waste a minute on them.”

Sween said coldly, “We take no chances, Pat. The ideal solution would be to kill all thirteen. But if we do, Hanardy might have punitive dreams about us as he awakens--which awakening will happen very soon now, one way or another. So”--the long gaunt face cracked into a grimace of a smile--“we’ll render them useless to him.”

“Ssssh!” said the blonde woman. She motioned toward the figure on the bed.

The somnambulistic Hanardy had opened his eyes.

Pat was aware, then, of the Dreeghs watching alertly. Involuntarily, briefly, she held her breath and waited.

Hanardy did not glance at her or at the Dreeghs, showed no awareness of anyone else being in the room.

Without a word, he got out of bed and removed his pajamas. Then he went into his bathroom and shaved and combed his hair. He came out again into the bedroom and began to dress, putting on his dirty pants, a shirt, and a pair of boots.

As Hanardy walked out of the room, Rilke shoved at Pat. “Remain near the sleepwalker,” she commanded.

Pat was aware that Rilke and Sween-Madro stayed close behind her. The others had slipped somewhere out of sight.

The somnambulistic Hanardy opened the airlock and headed down the gangplank.

Sween-Madro gestured with his head for Pat to follow.

The girl had hesitated at the top of the spidery “plank”. And now she stood for a moment gazing out at the city of Spaceport.

The airlock of Hanardy’s freighter was located about fifty feet above the heavy lower scaffolding that held the vessel. There was a space of about five feet between the opening and the upper scaffolding which actually constituted a part of the dock.

Almost straight ahead of her Pat could see the first building of the city. It was hard for her to realize that the entire populace of the port, with all their available equipment, had no chance against the Dreeghs. There was no protection here for her, or Hanardy, or anyone.

Awe came. The decisive factor was the intelligence of the Dreeghs.

She thought: and what’s in Steve’s *memory* of intelligence is all that stands between these vampires and their victims.

Minutes later she found herself walking beside Hanardy. She stole a glance at his blank face, so stolid and unintellectual. He seemed like a small hope, indeed.

The Dreeghs and she followed Hanardy along a street, into a hotel, up an elevator and along a corridor to a door numbered 517. Hanardy pressed a little button, and after a little the door opened. A middle-aged woman shuffled into view. She was dumpy and bleary-eyed, but her face bright-ened into a welcoming smirk as she saw Hanardy.

“Hi, there, Han!” she yelled.

Having spoken, she must have realized that the Dreeghs and Pat were with the spaceman. If she had any defensive thought, it was too late. Sween made her helpless with his mechanical light-flash hypnotism, about which he commented casually after they were inside and the door shut, “Nothing more complex is needed for human beings, or--” he shrugged--“Kluggs. Sorry, Pat,” he apologized to the girl, “but the fact is that, like the people of this system, you also have a vague idea that hypnotism and other non-conscious phenomena were invented by hypnotists and similar un-scrupulous people.”

He added ruefully, “You’ll never surprise a Lennel, or a Medder, or a Hulak with any control method short of--He broke off. “Never mind!”

He turned to the woman. Presently, under his guidance she was speaking enforced truths about her real relationship with Hanardy.

From the time they had met, Hanardy had given her money.

“What does he really get for it?” asked Rilke.

“Nothing.”

Since their method evoked only truth, Rilke frowned at Sween, “It couldn’t be altruism. Not on his low level?”

It was visibly an unexpected development. Pat said scathingly, “If altruism is an I.Q. factor, you Dreeghs probably come in below idiot.”

The man did not reply. The next instant his preternaturally long body was bending over the bloated female whom they had so briefly interrogated. There was a flash of blue as his lips touched hers. Half a dozen times he repeated that caricature of a kiss. Each time, the woman grew visibly smaller, like a sick person fading away on a hospital bed.

Finally, a bright light was flashed into the tired eyes, excising all memory of her degradation. But when they departed, the shriveled being on the bed was still alive.

The next person that the somnambulistic Hanardy led them to was a man. And this time it was Rilke who took the glancing kiss, and it was into her nervous system that the blue fire was drawn.

They drained all thirteen of Hanardy’s friends in the same way; and then they decided to kill Hanardy.

Grinning, Sween explained. “If we blow him up with you, the woman for whom he feels a dumb devotion, standing beside him in his home port--the only home he knows--he’ll be busy protecting those he loves. And then we, who will be out in space while this is going on, will probably survive the few instants that it will take for him to awaken.”

As she heard those words, Pat felt a hardening of her own resolve, a conviction that she had nothing to lose.

They had started up the metal gangplank that led to the airlock of Hanardy’s ship. Hanardy walked blankly in front, behind him was the girl, then Rilke, and, bringing up the rear, Sween. And they reached the final few feet, Pat braced herself and spoke aloud.

“It seems wrong,--” she said.

And leaped forward. She put her hands against Hanardy and shoved him over the side of the plank.

As she expected, the Dreeghs were quick. Hanardy was still teetering over the fifty-foot drop from the narrow walk when both the man and woman were beside him. As one person, they reached over the low handrail, reached out, reached down. That swiftly they had him.

In pushing at Hanardy, Pat found herself automatically propelled by the effort of her thrust away from Hanardy and over the other edge of the plank.

As she fell, she completed in her mind the sentence she had begun: “It seems wrong ... not to put that dumb love to the uttermost test!”

## 10

Spaceport, on Europa, like other similar communities in the solar system, was not at all like an ordinary little town of four thousand human beings. If anything, it resembled an old-style naval refueling station in the South Pacific, with its military establishment and garrison. Except that the “garrison” of Spaceport consisted of technical experts who worked in complex mechanical systems for the repair and servicing of spaceships. In addition, Spaceport was a mining post, where small craft brought their meteorite ore, gigantic plants separated the precious from the debris, and the resultant refined materials were trans-shipped to Earth.

The similarity to a South Pacific port was borne out in one other respect. Exactly as each little island post of Earth’s Pacific Ocean gradually accumulated a saturation of human flotsam and jetsam, so on Spaceport there had gathered a strange tribe of space bums. The tribe consisted of men and women in almost equal numbers, the size of the group being variable. Currently, it consisted of thirteen persons. They were not exactly honest people, but they were not criminals. That was impossible. In space, a person convicted of one of the basic crimes was automatically sent back to Earth and not allowed out again. However, there was a great tolerance among enforcement officials as to what constituted a crime. Not drunkenness, certainly, and not dope addiction, for either men or women. Any degree of normal sex, paid for or not, was never the subject of investigation.

There was a reason for this latitude. The majority of the persons involved--men and women--were technically trained. They were bums because they couldn't hold a steady job, but during rush periods, a personnel officer of the pressured company could often be found down in the bars on Front Street looking for a particular individual, or group. The bums thus located might then earn good money for a week or two, or perhaps even three.

It was exactly such a personnel officer looking for exactly such lost souls who discovered all thirteen of the people he wanted--four women and nine men--were sick in their hotel rooms.

Naturally, he called the port authorities. After an examination, the M.D. who was brought in stated that all thirteen showed extreme weakness. They seemed to be, as he so succinctly put it, "only marginally alive".

The report evoked an alarm reaction from the Port Authority. The Director had visions of some kind of epidemic sweeping up from these dregs of people and decimating his little kingdom.

He was still considering a course of action when reports from private doctors indicated that the illness, whatever it was, had affected a large number of affluent citizens of Spaceport in addition to the bums.

The total in the final count came to a hundred and ninety-three persons sick with the same loss of energy and near-death apathy.

## 11

At some mind level, Hanardy became aware that Patricia Ungarn was falling to her death.

To save her, he had to get energy from somewhere.

He knew immediately where the energy would have to come from.

For a cosmic moment, as his somnambulism was disrupted and replaced by the dreaming state that precedes awakening, he was held by rigidities of his personality.

There was a split instant, then, as some aware part of him gazed in amazement and horror at a lifetime of being a sloppy Joe.

That one glance of kaleidoscopic insight was all that was necessary.

The barriers went down.

Time ceased. For him, all particle flows ended.

In that forever state, Hanardy was aware of himself as being at a location.

Around him were 193 other locations. He observed at once that thirteen of the locations were extremely wavery. He immediately excluded the thirteen from his purpose.

To the remaining 180 locations, he made a postulate. He postulated that the 180 would be glad to make immediate payment.

Each of the 180 thereupon willingly gave to Hanardy seven-tenths of all the available life-energy in their 180 locations.

As that energy flowed to Hanardy, time resumed for him.

The living universe that was Steve Hanardy expanded out to what appeared to be a great primeval dark. In that dark were blacker blobs, nine of them--the Dreeghs. At the very heart of the black excrescences ran a fine, wormlike thread of silvery brightness: the Dreegh disease, shining, twisting, ugly.

As Hanardy noticed that utterly criminal distortion, he became aware of a red streak in the sinister silver.

He thought, in immense astonishment, "Why, that's my blood!"

He realized, then, with profound interest that this was the blood the Dreeghs had taken from him when they first arrived at the Ungarn meteorite.

They had given Sween most of it. But the others had each eagerly taken a little of the fresh stuff for themselves.

Hanardy realized that that was what the Great Galactic had noticed about him. He was a catalyst! In his presence by one means or another people got well ... in many ways.

In a few days longer, his blood in them would enable the Dreeghs to cure their disease.

The Dreeghs would discover the cure belatedly--too late to change their forcing methods.

For Hanardy, the scene altered.

The nine black blobs were no longer shaped by their disease, as he saw them next. He found himself respecting the nine as members of the only race that had achieved immortality.

The cure of them was important.

Again, for Hanardy, there was a change. He was aware of long lines of energy that were straight and white flowing at him from some greater darkness beyond. In the near distance was a single point of light. As his attention focused there, all the numerous lines, except from that light-point, vanished.

It occurred to Hanardy that that was the Dreegh ship and that, in relation to earth, it would "eventually be in a specific direction. The thin, thin, white line was like a pointer from the ship to him. Hanardy glanced along that line. And because he was open--oh, so open!--he did the touching. Then he touched other places and did a balancing thing between them and the Dreegh ship.

He oriented himself in space.

Oriented *it!*

As he completed that touching, he realized that the Dreegh ship was now slightly over six thousand light-years away.

That was far enough, he decided.

Having made that decision, he allowed particle flow to resume for the Dreeghs. And so--

As time began again, the Dreeghs found themselves in their own spaceship. There they were, all nine of them. They gazed uneasily at each other and then made a study of their surroundings. They saw unfamiliar star configurations. Their unhappiness grew. It was not a pleasant thing to be lost in space, as they knew from previous experience.

After a while, when nothing further happened, it became apparent that--though they would probably never again be able to find the Earth's solar system--they were safe ...

Pat's first consciousness of change was that she was no longer falling. But no longer on Europa. As she caught her balance, she saw that she was in a familiar room.

She shook her head to clear away the fuzziness from her eyes. And then she realized it was a room in the Ungarn meteorite, her home. She heard a faint sound and swung about--and paused, balancing, on one heel, as she saw her father.

There was an expression of relief on his face. "You had me worried," he said. "I've been here for more than an hour. My dear, all is well! Our screens are back to working; everything is the way it was ... before. We're safe."

"B-but," said the girl, "where's Steve?"

... It was earlier. Hanardy had the impression that he was remembering a forgotten experience on the Ungarn meteor-ite--a time before the arrival of Sween-Madro and the second group of Dreeghs.

The Great Galactic of that earlier time, he who had been William Leigh, bent over Hanardy where he lay on the floor.

He said with a friendly, serious smile, "You and that girl make quite a combination. You with so much owed to you, and she with that high ability for foolhardiness. We're going to have another look at such energy debts. Maybe that way we'll find our salvation."

He broke off. "Steve, there are billions of open channels in the solar system. Awareness of the genius in them is the next step up for intelligence. Because you've had some feedback, if you take that to heart you might even get the girl."

Leigh's words ended abruptly. For at that instant he touched the spaceman's shoulder.

The memory faded--

## 12

It was several weeks later.

On the desk of the Port Authority lay the report on the illness which had suddenly affected 193

persons. Among other data, the report stated:

*It develops that these people were all individuals who during the past fifteen years have taken advantage of a certain low I.Q. person named Steve Hanardy. As almost everyone in Spaceport is aware, Hanardy--who shows many evidences of mental retardation--has year after year been by his own simple-minded connivance swindled out of his entire income from the space freighter, ECTON-66 (a type classification)--which he owns and operates.*

*In this manner so much money has been filched from Hanardy that, first one person, then another, then many, set themselves up in business at their victim's expense. And as soon as they were secure, each person in turn discarded the benefactor. For years now, while one human leech after another climbed from poverty to affluence, Hanardy himself has remained at the lowest level.*

*The afflicted are slowly recovering, and most are in a sur-prisingly cheerful frame of mind. One man even said to me that he had a dream that he was paying a debt by becoming ill; and in the dream he was greatly relieved.*

*There's some story around that Hanardy has married the daughter of Professor Ungarn. But to accept that would be like believing that everything that has happened has been a mere background to a love story.*

*I prefer to discount that rumor and prefer to say only that it is not known exactly where Hanardy is at present.*

## **The Science Fiction Books of A. E. Van Vogt**

the books are listed in chronological order of publication. The publisher of the first world edition is given, and where this was an American edition this is indicated by (US). Following this, all British editions are listed.

Short stories are indicated by (collection), Omnibus Editions have a list of contents and these are cross-indexed by the use of In: references. All reissues of a book under a different title are listed with the original title.

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