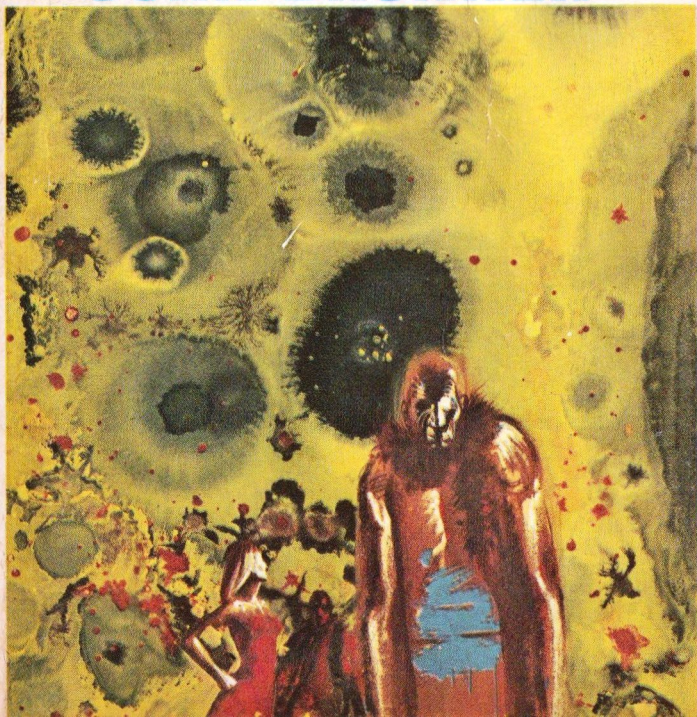


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ENIGMA FROM TANTALUS

JOHN BRUNNER



WHAT MAKES A MAN? WHAT MAKES A MONSTER?

"We won't be landing anywhere just yet," Waters said to the other passengers on the spaceship *Fulmar*. "I was pretty mystified by this story of mechanical breakdown, so I've been checking up." He hefted his little box. "I've spent the past half hour successfully tapping your subspace circuits, Captain. So I know the truth and I propose to share it with everyone."

Captain Wong's face crumpled, like a child's about to cry.

The others, paying no attention to Wong, waited breathlessly for Waters to continue.

"We're not to land. We're to orbit in space, indefinitely."

Beloved Sister Dorcas's screams pierced the quiet.

"You see," Waters continued, holding up his hand for silence, "this is being done on the direct orders of Master Brand. . . . You don't know the name?" He glanced inquiringly around. "No? Well, he happens to be one of the powers of Earth, and there is nobody in the galaxy to overrule him."

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5



**ENIGMA
FROM
TANTALUS**
JOHN BRUNNER

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1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

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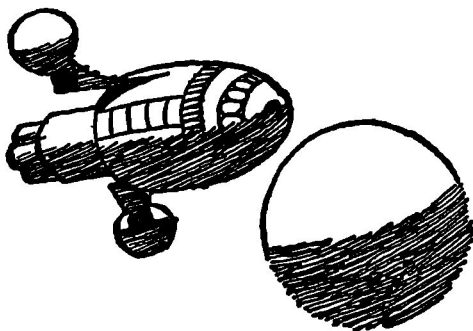
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THE REPAIRMEN OF CYCLOPS

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ENIGMA FROM TANTALUS



I

ON ALL OF Tantalus there were either seventy-nine or eighty minds. Harry Gamaliel had never been able to decide which figure was correct. There was no possible doubt about the current total of seventy-eight human beings on the planet; there was even less doubt about the Tantalans themselves. But as to thing thing here . . .

Shivering in the cool dawn air at the entrance to the high long data-analysis hall, he found the question disturbing him anew.

We aren't studying the Tantalans. How could we—humans, individuals? We aren't built to that scale!

He moved forward slowly between the man-tall memory banks: entropy tracking, chemical movement, chemical analysis, gross-physical mass-location, micro-physical mass-loc-

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tion. . . How did it feel to exist in such complex extension? Like God, omnipresent, immanent?

Parasite.

He slapped the thought down, conscious that his confidence was already at an excessively low level, and paused as he arrived before the display panels. A hundred square feet of calibrated dials, gauges with pointers, yes-no lights shining red, white, green, continuous-variable meters, integrated resultant curves . . .

Eighty minds. This monstrous machine, spread over nearly as much of the planet's surface as the Tantalus itself, must have passed the indefinable point at which awareness set in. It considered, evaluated, made decisions; it communicated, asked questions, sensed its environment—what more was required of a mind?

Yet the pretense had to be maintained. Sighing, he let his eyes rove across the display board. The machine was telling him everything it knew, as usual, and as usual he would have to ask for it all to be explained, and as usual Lynette was keeping him waiting.

He was tempted to start work anyway, but there was no point in going through the whole elaborate process twice. Restless, he turned aside to a spiraling stairway at the end of the hall and climbed it, his feet hushing on the soft thick plastic pad of each step. At the top he emerged into a gallery with continuous windows on either side; the view was of pale blue sky, translucent like deep water, and forests and fields and distant hills under a yellow sun of the right size, the right brilliance and spectral type.

Voidech was right. Tantalus was the only possible name.

Far to the left from where he stood, a herd of grubbers moved into sight, a cell of the Tantalus urging them along towards water. A frown creased his sallow forehead. The development of grubbers was currently occupying a good deal of his attention. The Tantalus's interest in inorganic mining

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was a post-contact phenomenon. When men first reached this world, the master of it was concerned entirely with organic substances, especially living ones; now there were the grubbers, secreted rather than bred in modified exowombs, and the hills on the horizon were riddled with exploratory tunnels. And there were the salamanders, too. Voidech's expedition had done a remarkably complete survey considering the limitations of their equipment, and surely they couldn't have overlooked the salamanders if they had already been developed.

Fire and iron. . . ?

No, there was no comparison between the subjective experience of the Tantalans and the human concept of divine awareness. There was no human standard to go by at all. The apparent intelligence of the Tantalans was unalarming—it was measurable on a human scale. It was just the *breadth* of it which was beyond human grasp.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine how it would feel to be conscious of a little finger out of sight beyond the horizon. He had tried a thousand times, and always failed.

Lynette Guignard/Camaliel came into the data-analysis hall wiping a trace of morning coffee from her upper lip. She was a handsome, rather than a pretty, woman; she had a high forehead as white as pearl, and brilliant, deep-set eyes. Looking at her, people concentrated on these two features which seemed to hold the clue to her personality, ignoring her thin-lipped mouth and rather masculine jaw. She moved with athletic grace down the spinal way of the hall, peering ahead in the expectation of seeing Harry by the display board.

"Harry?" she called in her soft clear voice, and a moment later, realizing, added, "are you up in the gallery?"

A sound of footsteps, and her husband appeared at the head of the stairway.

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"Sorry! Didn't hear you come in."

She gave him an understanding smile. "Back at the usual game—trying to think yourself into Tantalus shoes?"

He forced a grimace by way of reply; then, as though against his will, followed the idea through, his eyes reverting to the dials and meters on the display board. "Lyn, how could you infer the use of writing if you were blind and had to deduce the existence of light from heat-patterns on your skin? Are we any better equipped to tackle this job?"

"You spent too much time with that horrible man Caversham," Lynette told him in a practical tone. "You let him infect you with his cynical dislike of people, and it's got you down."

"You don't do him justice," Harry countered. "Veliz liked to make him out a pathological misanthrope, but he's not. He's—" He stopped, groping in the air for the right word. "He's a question-putter," he finished lamely. "And the questions he asks don't happen to be palatable ones. They're still valid."

"I'm glad Veliz sent him packing," Lynette said firmly. "I never could work out why they let him come here in the first place. They might as well have sent us that dreadful missionary woman who was on the ship—no, cancel that; I guess you'd have wound up wondering if the Tantalus was the Beast with seven horns, or something." She blunted the sarcasm with an affectionate pat on his arm, and nodded at the display board. "Shall we start?"

Harry shrugged and complied, dropping into one of the two operator's chairs facing the panels. "Caversham was brought here for the same reason they took the passengers from the ship over the whole set-up before they lifted again: on the off-chance. We have no better principle to go by, after all. *Something* welds the Tantalus into a functioning whole, and so far we have a word for it: telepathy. An empty box!"

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"A black box," Lynette murmured, taking the second chair.

"What?" Reaching for the detail-examination switches, Harry gave her a sidelong glance.

"A black box. Forgotten your history of physics course?"

"Oh yes, I remember!" He turned the phrase over in his mind. "Apt, I guess . . . Lyn, doesn't it *ever* bother you—the frustration of it, not even being able to find a point of attack?"

"Not really." Lynette chuckled. "I still maintain Caversham got at you! It took us millennia to make sense of our own mental processes, so it's bound to take a good long time to evaluate the first non-human intelligence we run across. And we came to it, remember. We're here on Tantalus, and before we arrived the Tantalans hadn't even solved the problem of crossing the equatorial ocean."

"I wonder why we had to strike a bargain with it if we're so superior," Harry said sourly.

"Harry!" Genuinely shocked, Lynette swiveled her chair to face him. "What would you rather we did? Blackmailed it into letting us stay here? Wiped it out so we could steal its planet? What?"

"I'm sorry," Harry muttered. "Perhaps you're right about Caversham's effect on me. Let's get to work, shall we?"

He pushed home the master switch. With patronizing ease and speed the machine proceeded to take apart the overall pattern of the past day's events and display it, detail by petty detail.

Routine, routine, routine. The Tantalans' standard summer growth rate had been maintained, and the entropic and organic consumption readings were correspondingly up. Some breeding going on: basic units, grubbers, salamanders, foresters, farmers and herd-masters predominated, with a slight peak in the curve for soldier-cells to replace the loss sustained from a recent bearhound raid. There was also a slight rise in the total of exowombs used for "brain-cells," but this merely reflected the expansion going on on the southern con-

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inent, across the equatorial ocean. There, the Tantalus was not yet sufficiently well established to support the immensely complex supply network required by exowombs secreting brain-cells.

"I suppose we'd better set up some transportation for those," Harry said meditatively. "Apart from that, it looks like just another day. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not afraid of any major breakthrough—I'm so conditioned to this monotonous pattern we have . . . Lyn?" He snapped his head around, belatedly realizing that she was doing something out of the ordinary run.

In fact, she was holding a minor section of the chemical activity scan for further study, and her high white forehead was traced with the lines of a frown. She said after a pause, "Harry, I'm getting ozone traces where there ought not to be any. Look."

She switched the data across to his half of the board and added geographical co-ordinates. They identified a large hollow mound about forty miles distant: a commonplace formation of the type which served the Tantalus as stores for its exowombs. This one was secreting grubbers, according to Harry's recollection; there had been difficulty in keeping scanner gear working in the vicinity because the larval grubbers cut their teeth—literally—on any hard substances they could find, especially metal.

"Ozone?" he said. "Why is that odd? The Tantalus uses it for gene-mutation, and that's an exowomb station—"

"But the grubbers are breeding true now," Lynette cut in. "Think they're being modified further? If so, that's the first sign we've had."

Harry shrugged. "Okay, chase it if you like."

"I'm sorry—I have a hunch about it," Lynette declared in a don't-contradict-me voice.

"Hunch! And you complained about Caversham and his half-baked mystical taradiddle! All right, *all* right." Harry

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punched the code for anomaly-scan, and in a fraction of a second an anomaly came up on the board, huge and glaring.

"Cobalt!" they said together in astonishment. "But—"

Their heads turned; their eyes met. They both knew perfectly well that cobalt was one of the trace elements not involved in Tantalum bio-economy. It was only a little less common here than on Earth, but that slight difference had been enough to exclude it from protoplasm even in such small degree as terrestrial life required of it, as in cobalocyanamin.

"What's the betting," Harry said very slowly, "that there isn't a scanner anywhere near that mound?"

"There isn't one in working order for half a mile in any direction," Lynette muttered. "Those damned grubbers . . ." She ordered the machines to locate the nearest working scanner, and was on the point of instructing it to move towards the mound when Harry checked her.

"Rout it through the effluent-flow," he suggested.

"Sensible," Lynette approved, and amended her original command so that the scanner would approach the mound by way of the stream which served as a sewer or a vein, according to which view one was currently taking of the Tantalum's metabolism.

Five eternal minutes. The scanner reached the edge of the water and dipped samples of it. Analysis took seconds, and presentation of the results microseconds. Aghast, they read the incredible facts from the board.

"That's not grubber material," Lynette said positively.

"I can see that," Harry grunted. "What is it?" And, without waiting for her opinion, asked the machine.

The machine said it was human.

There was a period of echoing silence. Lynette ended it with an attempt at gallows humor.

"So that's what it did with Vivaldi's body!"

"No, it's not!" Harry rapped. "Look at the order of proba-



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bility—it's below point nine. The machine is saying it's human because it's not type-Tantalan."

"Contamination? I mean, if the Tantalan has been analyzing the body—"

Harry was already out of his chair. He said over his shoulder, striding away down the hall, "An unscheduled ship was through here the other day, damn it! I'm not taking any outside chances!"

Five seconds to absorb the implications; then Lynette was overtaking him out of the hall.

II

"AND A bosun tight and a midshipmite—"

The captain of the interstellar liner *Fulmar* was almost all the crew as well, and reminded himself of the fact occasionally.

"And the crew of the captain's gig!" A standing joke among starship captains. Where had it come from? No one bothered to remember. It was hardly even funny to laymen, let alone starship captains. But for the latter it had never been funny, it had never been meant to be funny.

"And the captain," he said very loudly to the attentive walls of his stateroom. He drew himself up in front of the variwall, currently at a mirror setting, and approved his appearance in much the same frame of mind as a shy boy into whom had been drummed the high status of his rich grandfather—no, grandmother—and who was about to meet the old woman for the first time. It wasn't the first time, because he had been to Earth often before, and she was the grandmother—crotchety, but *there*. His mind filled with a vague, fuzzy concept, half pictorial, half tactile: something connected with shriveled loins. . . ? He triggered the infrared setting of the mirror, and approved himself again: stark naked but for the tail of an animal from the high-gravity planet mockingly named Sisyphus, coiled around his neck and waist, and a thin layer of paint on his belly. He was quite mad at present, since starship crew could not sleep during a voyage and so needed a substitute for dreaming as a safety-valve for the tensions built up by continual infallibility.

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"My compliments to your captain, Captain Wong," he said with tremendous dignity. "Tell Captain Wong, Captain Wong, that he keeps a damned fine ship."

His madness was accurately rationed by the ship. In about five minutes they would broach normal for Earth, and he would have to return to duty, hating it; Earth in the sky disturbed him, and he would not go down to her surface again. Like the crotchety grandmother, impossible to love, who once had given messy birth, blood-leaking, to the loved, adored, desired mother.

"Are you not going to the observation saloon to watch the breakthrough into normal space?" Tanya Hesit asked. She was still on speaking terms with Caversham; after all, he had been on Tantalus for quite a long time, and there might be copy to be milked from him. . . . At the very least, a damaging passage of satire, subtly planned so that the arbitrating computers would assess the resemblance at less than point five—ideally, at point four nine—but people everywhere would know who was meant and snigger to themselves. . . .

Caversham raised his half-full glass and inspected the contents critically. "Why bother? Still, if it amuses you to supervise the infallible working of the machinery, pretend you're still the godling running the universe—I won't stand in your way. This bar is so superbly revolting I shall savor my last few minutes in it."

The bar was decorated in a style halfway between Chinolserie and Formal Martian, and the first time he discovered it he laughed for three minutes by the clock, helplessly; since then he had passed almost the whole of the voyage here.

Abruptly Tanya Hesit realized that all her attempts to needle him had failed, whereas his attempts to provoke her were working every time. She spun on her heel and marched out, determined that under no circumstances was her new travelogue going to contain a reference to Caversham.

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Before she reached the observation saloon, she had had to reconsider. How the blazes could she omit her meeting with him for the story? She'd been on Tantalus a matter of some hours, like everyone else aboard. Caversham had been there working on a project, for months, and she was the only other passenger who had put up with him after a first meeting. . . .

Blazes. She scowled and drew her red lounging suit an inch higher on her carefully maintained bosom. It had had no impact on Caversham at all, and that was perhaps the most disturbing matter on her mind.

Beloved Sister Dorcas was in her cabin, on her knees. The voyage-calendar was ticking away the time towards breakthrough, and she was terrified. Eyes as tight as though sealed with wax, guts churning, she prayed aloud.

"Let us survive to close the circle, Thou who came from the end of all things to the beginning of all things! Let the ship not fail on this voyage so small compared with Thy marvelous journey down the millennia!"

On the narrow junkshelf beside the comfortable bed—which she had not used—a symbolic stereocube glowed softly. It represented the Closing of the Circle. She was forbidden naturalistic images, but this was dear to her because if she looked into it from a certain angle it suggested . . .

Guilty, she redoubled the intensity of the prayer, words tumbling from her lips. But her stomach was in turmoil. All of a sudden she scrambled up and vanished into the tiny adjacent service compartment. She continued to pray while the necessary function was performed, so as not to think of an unhygienic subject.

The others were already gathered. There was Florens, the unofficial diplomat from Valhalla: by far the smallest man on the ship, like most of his people rather fat, and clad in an

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aggressive green which made him look like a sour apple. He was determined not to be impressed by anything encountered here or on Earth. He was in a commanding position, and he knew it. Valhalla's century-past snubbing of Earth had been a thorn in the flesh of the parent world for much too long; they would fawn on him to help have it removed.

With him was a woman who passed as his wife, and was entered on the passenger list as Nia Welk/Florens. Tanya Hesit had satisfied herself after an hour's close observation that the two were not married; they were the next thing to strangers. She had debated whether to gossip about it or keep the fact for release in her next travelogue. Boredom had persuaded her to the first course. After all a tiny scandal involving an outworld diplomat was hardly worthy of inclusion in a Hesit production. A major scandal . . . She had debated whether to seduce Florens so that the woman could surprise them together, because Valhallans were notoriously violent, but the idea of this plump, dull woman living up to the tradition was so unlikely she had refused to entertain it. Besides, she couldn't spare the time for hospitalization. Even a day lost would be disastrous.

There was Relly, tall and stooped: a scientist of some kind. He had spent most of the voyage shut in his cabin with a portable computer buzzing like a flight of maddened bees. That was no bother to Tanya Hesit—she had the cabin furthest distant from him. They had exchanged a couple of dozen polite sentences in the four days of the trip. Scientists were hardly of interest to anyone but themselves.

Relly had talked a little with one of his companions, Waters, the communications engineer, who had been out at Valhalla. Tanya Hesit had done her best to find out why he refused to talk to Florens, and failed. She was sure the failure was Caversham's fault. She could not explain why she suspected anything so absurd, and preferred to dismiss the matter as wounding to her vanity.

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Last, there was Hazel Graubart, a slender woman with a drawn face and fever-bright eyes. She had bought herself out of a colonization contract, and made no secret of the reason—she had hated life on Sequoia so much that for a full decade she had starved herself of all but necessities to get out of the place. She planned to scream about the way she had suffered when she landed back on Earth. It would take her a month or so to scream loud enough to be heard. It would take Tanya Hesit about two to three days.

The time to broach normal was close now; the shades had withdrawn from the huge main viewport, and there was only the velvet-black of subspace beyond. A little recovered from her fit of anger at Caversham, Tanya Hesit elbowed a chair control and dropped into the form-fitting shape as it rose from the floor, and looked across with malice at Relly.

"Is it true that starship captains are all insane?" she inquired loudly.

Heads jolted around. Florens's "wife" put her hand to her mouth, cancelled the gesture uncompleted.

"Why—ah—yes," Relly said. "I believe so. It's not my field, of course . . ." He let the words trail away.

"Your field!" said Waters with a slight sneer. "If it weren't for people like me, my friend, you'd have fenced in your fields by now so thoroughly you couldn't talk to anybody at all. As it is, you don't make a very good job of what communication you do achieve."

He bent a brilliant smile on the company. He was rather a good-looking man, of young middle age, with dark red hair, sleek on his scalp. "Starship crews can't sleep during their voyages, of course, and sleep offers a chance to relax from the strain of conscious thought. It's substituted for by a carefully measured ration of imbalance, you see."

"So that's why we're missing one of the happy band of brothers and sisters," Florens grunted. He was given to these mocking remarks, as a kind of armor against seeming to

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be impressed. "She's probably praying he recovers before we broach."

"I doubt if it would make much odds, actually," Relly said. Waters had nettled him, but he had taken a few moments to organize his next statement. "There has been some thought given to abandoning the use of crews. The machinery of a modern ship is perfectly infallible."

Tanya Hesit was annoyingly reminded of Caversham's crack about supervizing the operation of that machinery. She distracted herself with a glance at the voyage-calendar beside the viewport.

The day counter read zero. The hour counter read zero. The minute counter read zero. The second counter read zero. The voyage was over, and there was still only subspace black beyond the port.

She watched to see if it would change. It remained.

It was two minutes before any of them accepted the fact, and then Waters went storming off to look for the captain. The others waited, saying nothing, wondering whether this was doom.

Beloved Sister Dorcas peeked out between her eyelids and saw that the calendar was at zero. Relieved, but not too relieved to utter a hasty word of thanks, she got up, stretching her cramped legs. She moved to the door.

She emerged into the corridor just in time to block Waters's path; he collided with her, and in swearing at her for her carelessness got across the essential fact—the voyage was supposed to be over, and they had not broached normal.

Beloved Sister Dorcas was the first to scream.

III

ANGELO VELIZ, chief of Project Tantalus, was developing a permanently pinched expression. It had begun with his lips, which he habitually pursed when considering a thorny problem; in more than four years on this planet which posed him a problem without any clue to its answer, the tense drawing-together effect had spread till now it made his entire face appear to be aligned on a point somewhere in front of his nose. Suppose a sculptor had taken a tiny clay bust of him, about as large as two thumbs, and then closed three fingers on the soft material: that would have produced the identical impression.

Today was the day for progress reports—a pleasant fiction. If required, the machines at his disposal could have signaled back to Earth a complete running commentary on the situation here, without human intervention; at the terrestrial end, other machines could have processed the incoming data, asked supplementary questions, summarized the whole and filed it.

But this was not merely wounding to vanity, part-source of the commonest nightmare of the present century: it was also a negation of the whole intention behind Project Tantalus.

The nightmare . . . He shivered a little, even though he was accustomed to leave his sleeping quarters later than the rest of the staff had done so today, when the sun was already high and warm and the morning mists had cleared from the loathsomely Earthlike landscape. He had the nightmare too.

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For him, it took a very specific form: he always dreamed that he was one of a horde of immobile figures, stretching from horizon to horizon, all of whom but himself were perfectly content to have every want attended to by silent, infallible machines. *Every* want, up to and including the sexual ones.

Abruptly, he would become aware of his dehumanized condition; would struggle to convey his discovery to his companions—and would find that here too the machines had encroached on humanity, so that there was no means of even speaking except by the intervention of another shiny impersonal device, which naturally censored his message.

The immobile figures never heard, and he awoke sweating.

He had hoped that on Tantalus it would not be so bad. On Tantalus they had discovered an area of research where the machines could not go; the Tantalus was bonded into a total organism by telepathy, a *something* so intangible that no known mechanical detector could respond to it. Here human beings were indispensable.

Or were they?

It was a fair assumption. The Tantalus was wholly organic. Its planet was so like Earth that here they were, able to walk in its sunlight, breathing its raw air, drinking its water, even catching one or two diseases due to native germs—though since Ernesto Vivaldi, no one had actually died here. Hopeful, they had sought to respond to the engulfing waves of projected thought linking the Tantalus together, and found it as impossible as hearing a radio signal.

We've tried everything—

Angrily, he canceled the intrusive idea. He dared not let himself think that. So far they had only tried the possibilities which occurred to them. There was no success to show yet, granted. But today or tomorrow, or next year, an inspiration might strike someone. . . .

He went on down the straight paved path connecting the

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living quarters with the research center. Two of the junior members of his staff were climbing aboard a flitter, and paused to wave him good morning more from politeness than goodwill. Off to the southern continent, of course. A self-powered porter was loading a consignment of scanners into the open metal-mesh junkbags slung below the cabin of the flitter. More information for the computers . . .

Why had they used such dogmatic straight lines when laying out this site? As a gesture of assertive humanity, to contrast with the biologically-shaped patterns of the Tantalans? Could be. But the site had been laid out by Voidech on his second trip, well before Veliz's time, and it had never occurred to him to check up before.

No, we haven't tried everything. Maybe, indeed, we've been trying too hard. Some of our wild notions have come close to frustrating our whole research programme.

Like having Caversham here, for instance. It was a reasonable assumption that a person with rudimentary so-called "psi" talent ought to be exposed on Tantalus, like a litmus paper, to see if he was sensitized to this mysterious telepathic signal. Some of the permanent staff were here for just that reason—they were no more skilled or brilliant than a thousand others, but showed a plus factor, an x , which was imperfectly definable and so might relate to what they were trying to investigate.

But Caversham had been a total failure.

Veliz passed his hand across his forehead, wondering if he had been correct to take that abrupt decision to send him away. He had felt comforted once he had done so; he had exerted his power of choice as a free individual, he imagined. Only now, a few days later, the sense of doing right was fading.

Conceivably, he was utterly wrong. Conceivably he was shying away from the very thing he was hunting. Yet the

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deranging effect Caversham had had on some of the most valuable staff members, like Harry Gamaliel, surely outweighed all other considerations. . . .

Anyway, this was a long job. The final results might not be in in his own lifetime.

He quickened his pace as he came abreast of the entrance to the data-analysis building, a low gray structure with a line of windows completely encircling it just below the roof, and turned sharp right towards his own working quarters, the master office which shared its roof with the communications room.

He halted, startled, in the entranceway. The door of the master office was closed and still locked: a habit, even though in almost forty years the Tantalus had never attempted to intrude here or into any other of the human buildings. But the door of the communications room was open, and Lynette and Harry Gamaliel were visible in there—which was completely wrong, since they ought still to have been in data-analysis—and so was Geza Randolph, which was right. . . . But there was absolutely no mistaking the circuit they were using. They were linked to Earth, and a sober-faced man dressed in the stark black of an executive rank far too high to bother about attracting attention by wearing colorful clothes was listening to them with mingled concentration and dismay.

Exactly as Veliz digested the spectacle and made to utter his incredulous questions, this black-garbed man said, "Very well. We shall act instantly. I shall leave this circuit open with star priority while I notify the Powers of Earth."

What?

Veliz strode forward. The screen blanked. Geza Randolph, a wiry man with a wrinkled face and graying hair, shot an apologetic look at his chief as though to say, "I couldn't stop

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them!" And Lynette and Harry seemed to slump as if virtue had gone out of them.

"What's all this about?" blasted Veliz.

The two who should not have been here grew aware of his presence. They exchanged glances, reluctant to speak; then Harry said shortly, "The Tantalus is loose, chief."

"I don't understand." Veliz considered the facts as he had them: contact with Earth, reference to the Powers . . .

"That's not clear, Harry," Lynette said, and went on, addressing Veliz, "what he means, chief, is that there's an exowomb station about forty miles from here which we assumed to be secreting grubbers—because all our attempts to establish scanners permanently in the neighborhood were frustrated when grubbers started chewing on them. Only it wasn't grubbers the Tantalus was breeding there. It was a man."

Veliz listened to silence for the space of four heartbeats. He gulped enormously, swallowing as well as breathing air, and said, "You've been through to Earth with this transparent nonsense?"

He shot an accusing glare at Geza, who this time spoke his apology aloud: "Chief, I just *couldn't* stop them! They came in here like firefighters and shoved me away from the board—"

"You've been through to Earth?" repeated Veliz, ignoring the interruption.

"Of course." Harry's face was glistening with sweat. "We had an unscheduled ship out of here the other day, remember? Routed for Earth? The one you insisted on being diverted to take away Caversham?"

"Shut up!" Veliz wiped his own face reflexively; he wasn't yet sweating, because the shock hadn't penetrated to the deep levels of his mind, but the sight of Harry's moist skin made him itch. "What facts have you got to go on?"

Lynette answered promptly. "Cobalt: it's not required in Tantalus bio-economy, but the grubbers have been mining

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it and it's been being piped in to this exowomb station. We have traces of cobalocyanamin in the effluent flow. We have nearly a point nine correspondence to human tissue analysis in the dilute wastes. We've tried to get a scanner into the mound twice, and each time a grubber—not a larva, a grown unit—has attacked it and put it out of action. We've contributed a good deal of metal to the Tantalus's reserves this morning!" The attempt at lightness was ghastly. "We've scanned for uses of these substances here and the scan is negative. The human-type protoplasm on Tantalus is all accounted for in the bodies of the staff. That means it's gone off planet."

"The Tantalus can't yet know that we know," Harry muttered. His mind was elsewhere. "I'm working out a confusion pattern to randomize the design of what we've done so far; we must keep it in ignorance as long as we—"

"Shut up," Veliz said again. He looked and sounded extremely frightened. "What the blazes do you mean by going to Earth on this without consulting me?"

"You weren't here!" Lynette snapped, with no pretence of courtesy. "And the *Fulmar* was due to broach normal for Earth in—" She glanced at the fundamental time meter on the communications room wall. "Any minute now," she concluded.

"Either you're out of your minds," Veleiz declared, "or—" He checked, staring at Harry. "Or," he repeated more slowly, "this is some way of getting back at me for sending Caversham away."

"Weren't you listening to anything Lynette said?" Harry half-rose from his chair before the screen.

"I heard it! And you know what they're going to say—you know it perfectly well! You're making it look as though my decision to send Caversham away was a disaster! Even when they check up and find the danger doesn't exist it'll rankle

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in people's minds, and that's what you want, isn't it? Discrediting me any way you can!" He clenched his fists and took a pace towards Harry.

"Chief. . . !" Geza said faintly, and changed his mind about intervening.

"Forgotten why we're here?" Lynette said with acid sarcasm. "Forgotten why they picked Harry and me instead of any of the thousands of others who might have joined the staff? We have the *only* incontrovertible supra-rational talent. We're hunchbacks."

There was another pause.

"They haven't forgotten that on Earth," Lynette said. "Or their machines haven't. Forty years of the Tantalus Project are on record, and what we told them made them scared."

Veliz's shoulders sagged forward as if a heavy burden had been placed on him. He said, "You're saying that when the starship lifted from here the other day it took with it a—a stowaway? A unit of the Tantalus disguised as a human being?"

"No, and yes," Harry grunted. "Not a stowaway, which is impossible—a mass discrepancy that great would be instantly detected. A copy."

"But this is crazy!" Geza Randolph burst out. "The Tantalus couldn't imitate a human being! Biologically, maybe—we've seen it breed up new species like salamanders and grubbers since our arrival, I'll grant that. But to imitate a man in conversation, in reaction to other people—no! No, it's inconceivable!"

"When we struck our bargain with the Tantalus," Harry said glacially, "we agreed to help it establish itself on the southern continent in return for facilities to study it. And for forty years we've overlooked the corollary, even though our noses were rubbed in it."

"When the Tantalus asked for, and got, Vivaldi's body, for example," Lynette said. Her voice shook.

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"The Tantalum," Harry concluded, "has likewise had forty years to study us. And the way I see it, our assistance in spreading it to another continent hasn't satisfied its ambitions."

IV

THERE WERE, waiting in random groups around the gigantic main hall of Weshemspaternor—Western Hemisphere Spatial Terminal North—intending colonists. They would easily be distinguished on an ordinary day from anyone else who might have business here, such as officials of the Transport Authority or people coming to greet arrivals from an outworld. Their badge was a common expression of apprehension; they were facing the moment of truth when they had to decide whether they were genuinely sick of being passengers in this mechanized womb-symbol, Earth, and glad to be on their way to some less demanding world.

Today, noted Master Brand, the most apprehensive people present were exactly those who normally looked calm and cheerful.

They had brought him from his private estate in the Caribbean by a rocket so fast it had left a trail of law-suits impending, for damage psychological and physical. Its sonic boom had been far louder than thunder and over a thousand miles long. It was now, despite the best efforts of those escorting him, taking longer to get him from the landing-point to the Earthside epicentre of this unprecedented emergency than he had spent on the entire remainder of the trip. Someone had thought to clear his way by announcing that the bystanders must stay back "in the name of the Powers of Earth"—and of course had precipitated a surge of excitement and driven everyone under the terminal's mile-long roof to crowd towards Brand's path.

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Someone dodged the guardian ranks of officials—bad at this job of crowd-control because it was such an anachronism—and leapt in front of the floating chair on which he sat, shouting, “Please! Please, Master Brand, you must tell me!”

“Who was that?” muttered Brand over his shoulder as the offender was hauled back out of the way.

“One moment.” Standing beside him was the girl who acted as his remembrancer, four-eyed because wherever she looked two lenses mounted on her forehead looked also. From the lenses threads ran back under her sleek gold hair; from the circuits traced in conductive ink on her scalp, using her body as the antenna, signals went to computer memories all over Earth and at several points elsewhere in the Solar System.

“The name is Pigoyan,” the girl murmured. “Sensiservice. That’ll be because of the woman aboard the *Fulmar*—Tanya Hesit.”

“Ah yes. Ever taken any of her productions?”

A trifle startled at having such a personal question put to her when she was working, the girl hesitated. “Why—yes, I have.”

“What did you think of them?”

“Very—uh—sensational,” the girl said timidly.

“You have good taste,” Brand told her with a wry grimace. “I believe we are finally getting through this mess, anyway. Who’s that up there in executive garb?” He pointed.

“Rayt Cornelius, administrator first degree,” the girl said.

“You didn’t have to scan for that. Do you know him?”

“I was transferred from his department when I came to your staff.”

“He lost a good aide. I hope he doesn’t brood on the fact. Ah, he’s seen us.”

The platform ahead, jutting from the steep arc of the dome and giving on to suites of offices beyond, grew larger. Waiting on it, Cornelius and a string of remembrancers and other

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aides were clearly having a difficult time containing their impatience.

They regard me as another machine, Brand reflected. *And I take an unconscionably long time to scan and report on a problem.*

His conveyance sensed the level of the platform, rose vertically twenty feet and locked to its edge. Brand stood up unhurried and said, "Cornelius! What have you done with the ship?"

Below, the crowd buzzed its disappointment at catching only a brief glimpse of the seldom-seen phenomenon: one of the Powers of Earth.

What did they expect? An angel with a shining halo? Or a man made over in a machine's image, perhaps? Brand turned the idea over in the back of his mind while attending to Cornelius's reply in the front.

"We did the thing which we were advised to be safest, Master Brand," Cornelius stated. "To avoid all possibility of the—ah—spy escaping, we arrested the *Fulmar* prior to it broaching normal. The vessel is now held in subspace, and no attempt has yet been made to communicate."

"What?" Brand stepped forward as though jolted from behind. "Name of disaster, man! There's only supposed to be one 'spy' on the ship, isn't there? And there are seven or eight other free individuals trapped in there who don't know what's happened, probably being scared to death!"

Stiffly, Cornelius said, "I took the decision consistent with maximum security—"

"You mean you asked a machine how to achieve maximum security, and then did as it said," Brand cut in icily. "How long has it been since they were arrested, to use your term?"

"Approximately forty minutes," Cornelius answered. "I have no special reason to think that any of them will be scared to death in that space of time."

"Get in touch with the captain. Inform him that there has

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been a mechanical failure of some kind and that we'll release the ship from subspace shortly. In fact, hold them there as long as it takes me to review the data; I doubt if we'll have any call not to permit them to emerge into normal space and continue in orbit."

"A starship captain can scarcely have such a crude lie foisted on him," Cornelius pointed out.

"Then either find out what sort of lie is sufficiently subtle, or else simply instruct him to lie to the passengers," Brand snapped. "I'm not a machine, Cornelius! Don't expect *me* to do your thinking for you!"

Huffily, Cornelius turned away.

A quarter hour later, in the office which normally served the terminal director as a pleasant environment in which to pass his working day—exercising himself in his two hobbies of stove-cooking and metallizing flowers, by the fittings—Brand leaned back in his chair.

"My compliments, Cornelius," he said. "You indubitably acted promptly, if with no great discrimination. How did the conversation with the ship's captain go? And what's his name, by the way?"

"Horatio Wong," Cornelius answered. He was a little mollified by Brand's half-hearted commendation; possibly in the interval he had thought over what he knew about the Powers of Earth and recognized the fact that they were notoriously eccentric. "And his crew is called Felicia Pannell/Wong."

"Married, hm? Unusual. Unless—oh, he's near retirement, presumably."

"Very near." Cornelius looked unhappy. "He's been being deconditioned during his past two voyages, and this was to be his last. He's flying back to Shiozuchi and settling there."

"And we're holding him up." Brand rubbed his chin. "I grant you, that's tricky."

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"Worse. He's already been held up. His ship was diverted to Tantalus on the special orders of the project chief."

"Next you'll be telling me he's had to have anti-Earth treatment as well as ordinary deconditioning."

"That's right."

"Splendid," Brand exclaimed, to the other's astonishment.

"It's finally beginning to smell like a problem worthy of serious attention. I doubted it at first—after all, the notion of an alien creature successfully masquerading as a man for longer than a few days is preposterous. But this sets a very sharp time limit. Oblige me by finding out just how sharp, will you?"

"At once," Cornelius said.

As he turned to the door, however, the panel slammed back and an angry man in executive garb with Transport Authority flashes came in, face stormy.

"What the blazes is going on out there in the hall?" he demanded.

There was a moment's silence. Then Cornelius said in a reproving tone, "Director Shofee, this is Master Brand—one of the Powers of Earth!"

Shofee's aggressiveness fell from him like a cloak. He said with an obsequious bow, "I'm dreadfully sorry! I would never have . . ." The words trailed away. Meantime, however, Cornelius had looked past him, through the open door, and seen what in fact was going on in the hall to have provoked Shofee's annoyance.

A floor of precast slabs had been fitted on longerons, ten feet above the normal floor; on this basis, gangs of men with humming machines were at work, marking up positions with white paint, inscribing the curlicue traces of printed circuitry on the underside of the dome, and already heavy freight transport was sliding in on silent air-cushions with computers, memory-stores, communications equipment and other gear.

"Don't look so startled, Cornelius," Brand advised. "Even

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though I'm not a machine, I have a healthy respect for what machinery can do. Oh—before you go, *did* you persuade the captain to lie reassuringly to his passengers?”

“He agreed to do what he could,” Cornelius said. “But he already has one hysteric: a Circle missionary from Bethel. And having to tell lies about his beloved vessel is going to put a bigger strain yet on his mental stability.”

He went out.

“Excuse me, Master,” Shofee said timidly as Brand swung his chair back to the screen on which he had been reviewing events so far. “Is this—ah—interruption likely to go on long? Am I to make special arrangements for my own work? We have quite a busy day, what with two colony-ships scheduled to lift four and a half thousand emigrants . . .”

“The title ‘Master’ is not of my choosing,” Brand said absently. “I don’t much like it. Don’t tack it on to every sentence, will you? The habit annoys me. As to your work: are you hungry, perhaps? Or have you a mistress to whom you promised some metallized tulips?”

Shofee colored with embarrassment.

“Master, you misinterpret the—”

“Shofee, I don’t give a yard of a comet’s tail for the way you choose to run this terminal; so long as it works, I and everybody else in the galaxy will be well satisfied. But since the interruption is of absolutely indeterminable length—you should know that, incidentally; they don’t send for me if the machines can give a projected time-limit for a problem’s solution—as I was going to say, since I shall be here for some while and you’re nominally my host even though Cornelius is running things, you may be happier knowing what you’re going to see.”

“And that is—?” Shofee said nervously after a pause.

“Somebody thinking,” Brand responded. “A declining habit. Do you want to make yourself useful, really? Or were you serious about being so busy with these colony-ships?”

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Shofee took his time over answering. At last he said, "Well, to be honest, Master—I mean, to be quite honest! I'm not expecting any snags; the terminal is virtually completely automated and has been for two or three decades . . ."

"And the programmes for the next few days have been prepared well in advance by the machines themselves, hm?"

"Yes."

"Splendid." Brand was keying data up to his screen as he talked, his eyes never leaving the words, figures, diagrams that flashed briefly before him. "Then you can fix me a snack. I had no breakfast, and I like stove-cooking if it's well done."

Shofee stared at him in bewilderment, but already Brand's attention was elsewhere. He had keyed the screen back to normal communication and was in circuit with a department Shofee had never heard of, identified by its visual signal as the Department of Current Locations.

"Find me Voidech," Brand said. "The man who led the expedition which discovered Tantalus."

Three seconds. "Dead on Valhalla: a rockfall," said a musical voice.

"Damnation." Brand rubbed his chin. "Very well. Anyone from his crew will do—cancel! *Everyone* from his crew, and if they're off Earth get them to a communicator and in touch with me here."

"Action confirmed," said the sweet voice, and the screen went blank again.

V

BELOVED Sister Dorcas had stopped screaming by the time she came running into the observation saloon; she had gone over to a sort of animal moaning. Stumbling on the floor-long hem of her black gown, she went to the viewport and began to hammer with both fists on the smooth cold pane.

The others, their minds still blurred by the shock of the ship's failure to broach normal, stared at her for long seconds, then turned dimayed faces to each other.

"Oughtn't we to—do something?" Relly suggested at length. His protrusive Adam's apple bobbed on his thin throat.

There was no direct reply. This was an event as unexpected as the ship remaining in subspace. Tanya Hesit, who thought she had a reaction ready for any emergency, discovered that for overt hysteria she had none. Her mind seemed to have switched itself off.

"Where's the captain?" she muttered. "Where's the crew? Why is Waters being so long?"

The communications engineer had impressed her as a capable person—indeed, that was why he had gone to find the captain before any of the rest of the passengers could think of it. Who else, then? For all her interstellar traveling, she was herself a product of tidy, organized, predictable Earth. One of the outworlders? Life was more brutal in the colonies

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Florens made as though to approach Sister Dorcas, changed his mind, and spoke instead of acting.

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"Do you think I should go after Waters, maybe?"

A distant part of Tanya's mind registered the implication: if he was appealing for advice, Florens's mask of self-confidence was badly breached.

He was even including his "wife" in the sweeping glance he made requesting advice.

Hazel Graubart's mouth worked, suggesting that in another few minutes she would abandon her self-control and join Sister Dorcas in battering at the viewport. *At least*, Tanya told herself, *I can save us from having two lunatics on our hands*. She moved towards the unwilling colonial with a smile meant to be reassuring, but Hazel saw it as a threatening glower and flinched away.

The door slid back. Their heads jerked around in instant unison. But it was neither Waters returning, nor the captain come to explain their predicament. It was Caversham, his half-full glass brought from the bar still in his hand.

He was a man who gave the impression of being very big although he was no taller than either Relly or Waters. As a symbol of his disillusionment with modern times—which he never disguised in conversation, either—he had let his hair and beard grow to their natural length, and his face, tanned to the color of seasoned oak, was islanded in the waves of tawny whiskers. The beard continued down to join a mat of hair on his chest, a further gesture of revolt, since although it was common on several planets for men to expose their torsos they generally had all their facial and body hair-roots extirpated.

He stood in the doorway for a long moment, taking in the situation. Then he gave a mutter of un verbalized annoyance, set his glass carefully down on a nearby shelf, and strode the three long paces required to bring him within arm's reach of the sniveling Sister Dorcas. A big hand clamped on her shoulder and swung her around to face him. Briefly, her horror at being touched by a man struggled with her mindless

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fear; then Caversham slapped her on both cheeks, and all the color drained from them except a patch of red marking the site of contact.

"Hey!" Relly said, stepping forward. He checked uncertainly and cancelled the words he had meant to follow, for Sister Dorcas bowed her head and covered her eyes with her hands, but was suddenly silent.

"What were you all standing around helpless for?" Caversham snapped. "Waiting for some nice friendly machine to see to the problem for you?"

Sister Dorcas moved blindly to a chair—the one which Tanya had been using—and dropped into it. She fumbled in the sleeve of her black gown and produced a tissue with which she dabbed at her eyes. She didn't say anything.

Stiffly, because he, like all the others, could not bear to seem less capable than the repulsive Caversham, Florens said, "I was under the impression that interstellar liners were equipped with medical facilities. Uh—"

"So they are!" Caversham barked. "But you have to make use of them! Did you honestly expect them to turn up of their own accord?" He worked his mouth as though about to spit on the floor, and they all flinched, but it was only a pantomime.

"You!" he added, pointing at Tanya. "Get the crew here and we'll organize a tranquilizing shot of some kind for Dorcas."

The saloon seemed to swim around Tanya for a second. She said faintly, closing her eyes, "I'm sorry—I couldn't. I—I have a block against medication."

"What a bunch of incompetent gasbrains!" Caversham thundered. "Hysteria, phobias, panic— What *you* want is a cozy mechanical womb!"

He started towards the door, adding, "All right, just keep her calm while I go myself!"

Before he reached the threshold, however, the panel slid

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back once more, and in the opening was revealed the ship's crew—the other of the two responsible for its routine supervision.

"Ah, Felicia!" Caversham said with honest relief. "Can we get some treatment for this hysterical little fool here?"

Tanya looked at him. She felt obscurely guilty that neither she nor, she was certain, any of the other passengers bar Caversham had troubled to find out that this small auburn-haired woman had a name of her own. The crew of a starship was so much part of the vessel one came, without realizing, to think of it as mere equipment.

"Yes," the crew said, taking Dorcas's hand with a gentle urging movement so that she rose passively to follow. "I've activated a treatment machine. Come along, Sister Dorcas—that's right."

Hazel Graubart broke out of her apathy and leapt up. She clutched at the crew's arm.

"Name of disaster, aren't you going to tell us what's happened? Why aren't we out of subspace yet? Don't you know either?"

Florens's "wife" put her hand to her mouth, her only apparent method of responding to alarming ideas.

The crew paused. She said calmly, "There has been a mechanical fault. My husband the captain will come to you and explain it in a few minutes. We have contacted Earth and ways to help are being discussed."

She went out.

Ready to grasp at anything which might help to restore her ordinary aggressiveness, Tanya sneered at Relly. "And you were saying they were going to do away with starship crews because the machinery was perfectly infallible! Where would *we* be if they'd done it already?"

Relly didn't answer, but his Adam's apple bobbed again, more violently.

"I imagine you'd be a lot more comfortable!" Caversham

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told Tanya sarcastically. "You've got a mindless trust in machinery yourself, just like everyone else here."

"I resent that!" Tanya retorted.

"You have no right to!" Caversham combed at his beard with angry fingers. "I shall never get over this as long as I live—the sight of half a dozen presumably intelligent adults standing around an obvious hysteric waiting for a machine to see to her, when all it needed was a couple of slaps across the face."

"Most people don't take so readily to violence as you seem to," Florens said in a sneering tone.

"Some people," Caversham answered in a deliberate impersonation of Florens's Valhallan accent, "haven't the common sense needed to distinguish violence from force."

"There's no need to mock—" Florens began, reddening.

"I'm not trying to make you look foolish," Caversham cut in. "You've done an excellent job of your own accord."

Florens' red face turned almost purple. He drew himself up to his full height and made as though to throw himself on Caversham, fists clenched. Dismayed, his "wife" caught at him.

"You were saying something about violence?" Caversham needed gently.

"Ach!" Florens let his hands drop to his sides. "I'm not going to waste breath with you."

"Splendid," Caversham approved. "Why not simply wait for the captain and find out what's happened to the ship before you let loose your frustration on someone who isn't responsible?"

In his full-dress uniform Captain Wong was a good deal more impressive to anyone but himself than when he stood before the variwall in his stateroom and admired himself in the mirror setting. Conscious authority surrounded him like

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an aura, and his mere presence seemed to reassure the passengers.

"I believe you already know," he said smoothly, bestowing a brief smile on each of them in turn, "that we have suffered a slight—ah—delay. I have been in contact with those in authority, and I am sure it won't be more than a short while before we broach normal."

Caversham, eyes frosty, combed at his beard. He had his own opinion about this "mechanical fault."

"What is actually wrong?" Relly inquired.

A shadow seemed to pass over Wong's almond-eyed, unemotional face, but his voice remained absolutely even.

"I don't believe stardrive is your field, sir. And I think it would therefore be hard to make it clear."

Relly, accustomed to the isolation of one scientific discipline from another, shrugged and subsided. He peered around the saloon as though recollecting what Waters had said earlier, but the communications engineer had not returned with the captain.

"But—how long exactly?" Hazel Graubart demanded. "It's been so long since I saw Earth, and I want—"

"Yes!" Tanya chimed in. "I have a contract with Sensi-service to fulfil, and it's imperative that I should—"

"There are high officials of the Earth government waiting to confer with me at Weshemspaternor!" Florens announced, trying to make his voice compensate for his lack of inches.

Wong's mask of confidence melted like wax. Unsure of himself, he looked from one face to another of those around him. He said faintly, "Well, it's hard to be sure . . ."

"Look!"

The exclamation came from Relly. He had risen to his feet and thrown out a dramatic arm. Beyond the viewport had appeared the familiar gibbous form of a green-blue planet, and the black of space beyond was sown with comforting stars.

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There was an immense collective sigh of relief.

"I presume now nothing will hinder us from landing," Relly said pompously. "As I was about to inform you, Captain, I'm pursuing a major research project and it can positively not be completed without access to Earth's facilities, so it's a matter of some urgency for me also to be on-planet."

"Ha. Ha."

The words were dropped like immense stones into the pool-still air of the saloon. The speaker was Waters, the communications engineer, who was at the door carrying a small box with wires trailing from it.

"What was that for?" Tanya demanded.

"You won't be landing anywhere just yet," Waters said to Relly. "None of us will. I was pretty mystified by this story of a mechanical breakdown, so I've been checking up." He hefted his little box. "I've spent the past half-hour successfully tapping your subspace circuits, Captain! So I know the truth, and I propose to share it with everyone."

Wong's face crumpled, like a child's about to cry.

"I thought so," Caversham murmured, his sharp eyes fixed on Waters. "Go on, man—spit it out."

The others were too tense to note the coarseness of his words. Waters had a totally attentive audience for his message.

"We're not to land. We're to orbit in normal space, indefinitely."

Florens let out a cry. "This is absurd! Why, when they hear about it the officials waiting at the space terminal—"

"Will shut up and look happy," Waters informed him. "You see, this is being done on the direct orders of Master Brand. You don't know the name?" He glanced inquiringly around. "No? Well, he happens to be one of the Powers of Earth, and there is nobody in the galaxy to overrule him."

VI

THERE WAS a need. A machine saw to it.

There was a problem. A machine solved it.

There was a wish. A machine granted it. This was Earth, but the outworlds were all, to a greater or lesser degree, copies of this original. Man on all his worlds was much the same, and had the same pattern of needs, problems and wishes, and because one highly-developed method of coping with them had been evolved it was easier to replicate it than start again from scratch.

How would it be done differently, anyway? Most people had no answer to that question.

The effect was extremely comfortable, but comfort was not a perfect protection against the qualms felt by modern man. There was a sense that the ancestors who had built this fine glossy environment were superior beings; there was a great obsession with playing at pioneers and a constant trickle of departing colonists, dissatisfied with mere comfort. Also there was the typical modern nightmare, replacing the previous archetypes of falling, drowning, floating in empty space and being overrun by horses. Now one dreamed of being powerless in the mechanical cradle of infallible machinery. The commonest psychological problem for which people consulted therapists remained what it had been for some centuries: sexual incapacity. But the root cause had shifted subtly. It was no longer lack of personal confidence which produced the impotence or the frigidity. It was lack of social confidence.

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And yet ostensibly it was not true that the ultimate authority reposed in man's machines. Above them stood the Powers of Earth, and the Powers were men and women.

"If a situation arises twice," so the saying went, "a machine can be designed to cope with it. If a situation is unique, it takes a man."

Master Brand, frowning a little, chewed on the sandwich Shofee had diffidently prepared for him. The meat was natural and stove-cooked with a little salt; the bread was from field-grown grain, probably imported, and stove-baked. The meat was tough, the bread was coarse. Still, it had a certain symbolic value, and Brand's digestion was excellent—as presumably, was Shofee's.

The more he reviewed the data on this problem, the more he was tempted to promote it in his mind to the superior status of a crisis. As he had told Cornelius in the first place, it was the pressure on Wong which was so crucial.

The captain—and the crew, but chiefly the captain—of a starship contained within himself the microcosm of the human predicament. A starship was the most complex unit of machinery ever devised by mankind. It had to exist during each voyage on two planes of reality, and in subspace most of normal space's laws—regarding transmission of energy and information, conventional solidity, and so forth—were inapplicable. The captain and crew, but once more especially the captain, had to supervise the vessel's operation from start to finish, unceasingly and with no minutest lapse of attention. This was why they could not sleep; abstraction to a level of reality neither in normal space nor in subspace broke the continuity. Instead, they had to relax with waking insanity, meted out to them automatically.

Their insanity took many forms, but the commonest was a tendency to anthropomorphize their whole experience. The ship became an extension of their bodies—it was indispu-

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tably an extension of their minds, anyhow, since they had to feel for its working with their subconscious awareness—and their destinations were interpreted as goals and ambitions, not places.

So with Wong. Earth was symbolized to him as a grandmother, very rich and powerful and completely overwhelming.

To fit him for retirement, he had had to undergo anti-Earth treatment. Keeping him here in orbit, with the parent world looking over his shoulder, was going to shatter him.

A tap on Brand's shoulder. Shofee said, "Excuse me!" He had cured himself of his initial repetitions of Brand's title. "We have many complaints from local space operators regarding the presence of the *Fulmar* in orbit here."

"Am I supposed to care?" Brand grunted.

Sol! Those who had reported the emergency, the researchers out at Tantalus, were people to be listened to, although the project chief—what was his name? Ah: Angelo Veliz—had messaged profuse apologies a short while later. These two, the Gamaliel couple, were hunchbacks. The obsolete word was handy for attachment by a punning link to the new referent, once there were no more cripples.

The power of drawing correct conclusions from data which a computer would reject as wholly inadequate was so far the only supra-rational talent confirmed among mankind. Others were always being hinted at, but under close inspection dissipated, as though one were to try and grasp a wisp of smoke. Brand was a hunchback himself, and had trained under somewhat similar circumstances to the Gamaliel couple, though on a human planet, not on Tantalus. Logically, the possessors of the one talent no machine could copy were the persons to set above machines and everyone else. They became, if they proved right every time, the Powers of Earth.

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All right. The Gamaliels had said that a cell, or unit, or individual section, of the collective mind on Tantalus had been moulded into the shape of a man and sent to Earth aboard the *Fulmar*. Veliz was probably in such a panic not because he understood the nature of the threat, but because he had asked the *Fulmar* to call, diverting her from the regular Valhalla-Sequoia-Earth route, in order to get a man named Caversham off his neck. Caversham was that rare type in modern times, a quasi-mystic, who had been a test subject for one of the other alleged psi powers—ETP—and had been “exposed” on Tantalus even when the investigations proved negative on the continuing principle of trying anything to get at Tantalus telepathy.

Hypothesize a purpose for the Tantalus, now. Grant its innate desire to expand, like any living creature; witness its bargain with the visitors from space to help it cross the barrier of the equatorial ocean in return for allowing itself to be studied. Would it wish to spread to Earth?

Unlikely. Brand rubbed his chin. The Tantalus was very intelligent and despite its differing form used concepts of close to human type. Most probably, it was itself engaging in the study of mankind; one of its most recognizable attributes was plain curiosity. There had never been more than about eighty people on Tantalus except when a ship with passengers paid a short visit: too few to satisfy it, maybe.

Assume for the moment it proposed to study man in his native setting. Unquestionably it was capable of secreting a very good facsimile of a human being, for the Gamaliels would not have sounded the alarm on flimsy evidence. It would be necessary to run gross-physical checks, of course, but they would probably show nothing. Some psychological betrayal was needed to select the copy aboard the ship from the original.

On the surface, detection should be easy. The facsimile would not *be* a human being. It would behave in some res-

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pect oddly. Closer examination, however, revealed that everyone aboard the *Fulmar* might be expected to act differently from a "normal" Earthborn human.

Caversham, to start with—the obvious prime suspect, in that he had been on Tantalus a long time and could most easily have served the Tantalans for a model—was reported to make a deliberate habit of eccentricity. He was disillusioned with modern times, and enjoyed shocking those he met by insulting them or standing conventional behavior on its head.

And there was no proof that the Tantalans had needed more than the few hours the *Fulmar's* personnel had spent on its planet to put the finishing touches to its work. It might have had a sort of averaged blank prepared, awaiting an opportunity to be substituted. As to the impression of the personality on the facsimile: it did not necessarily follow that because human minds failed to detect Tantalans telepathy the Tantalans were incapable of sensing human thoughts.

There was a whole line of research there. Brand made a mental note to have the alarming possibility cleared up as soon as he could.

The captain and crew were not exempt from suspicion. They could both be expected to show signs of abnormality, and it would take the most subtle and refined analysis to prove that it resulted purely from their conditioned, pre-planned instability.

As to the remaining passengers: there was the diplomat from Valhalla, Florens, accompanied by his wife for official purposes, and Valhallans notoriously cultivated non-Earthlike customs because they were a very insecure colonial culture in search of its own identity. It would be necessary to have a thorough cultural survey run. . . .

A tap on his shoulder. Cornelius: "Master Brand, we have an urgent message from the Department of Pan-Human Affairs. The effect of this continual detainment of the Valhallans

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representative aboard the *Fulmar* could be to undo a century's work towards a rapprochement of our two planets."

Brand half-turned his head. "Tell them to go contemplate the infinite. There are eight hundred million Valhallans, and only one Tantalán."

The traveloguer, Tanya Hesit, had made a life's career of low-grade sensationalism. She was a borderline psychotic, obviously—it took an unbalanced mind to view the universe through her particular kind of distorting mirror. Reports showed that her sexuality was especially disturbed, bearing type-traces of narcissism and lack of normal affect. In other words she was mildly nymphomaniac because she was looking for a permanent emotional union she did not know how to attain.

Once more, an interruption—Cornelius again, announcing that a man called Pigoyan from Sensiservice, who had come to meet Tanya Hesit and begin work on her contracted travelogue, was threatening suit for everything he could think of including *habeas corpus*, malicious persecution and violation of the Charter of Pan-Human Rights. Cornelius sounded anxious.

"Send him a transcript of the brief accorded to the Powers of Earth," Brand grunted. "If he wants to have that changed, it'll take him through the next legislative session—and this will *have* to be settled before then!"

There was the scientist, Relly. Brand's eyes were beginning to sting, and he rubbed them absently. Honestly, if the Tantalán had waited a century for a better bunch of eccentrics among whom to hide it couldn't have made a superior choice. Relly wasn't just a man playing at science; he was a highly original researcher in one of the most advanced modern disciplines, the one known formally as polytopology

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and nicknamed mathemadness. Relly would presumably have more in common, mentally, with a megabrain computer than any of the other passengers on the ship; he would be accustomed to a world in which he spoke more to machines than to other people. Scientific specialties had become islands of thought which only computer-controlled networks could link together. Hence Relly would be a borderline schizophrenic, capable of communicating at the level of light conversation or else in the deep-down jargon of his own associates—nothing between.

Yet another interruption, from his remembrancer now; Cornelius was away pacifying Pigoyan. "Sir, we're advised that computer capacity totaling four megabrain is being kept idle until Relly gets off that ship. It was held for him at his special request, and it's costing his hosts, the Foundation of Advanced Mathematics, half a billion a day."

"Splendid. I didn't think that much spare capacity could be made available in under a week. Requisition it—I'm going to need all of it, and probably more."

"They won't be very happy," the girl said. She was getting less timid in her manner of address.

"They don't have to *like* it. They just have to *do* it."

There was Beloved Sister Dorcas, a Circle missionary from Bethel. Not much to be said about her, of course. Anyone who believed that Jesus Christ was a time-traveler and that the sole purpose of human history was to facilitate his departure into the past as soon as possible was patently precessing with all gyros, and someone who went around trying to persuade others that this idea was important was all of the foregoing, squared.

"Master Brand!" Shofee, this time; Cornelius wasn't back and the remembrancer was out pacifying the Foundation of

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Advanced Mathematics. "A highly influential group of Circle Believers is alleging religious persecution and will be given all the necessary facilities for blowing up a scandal—this man Pigoyan has offered them—unless their missionary is allowed to land at once."

"Have the Communications Authority review their license to proselytize. They've been exceeding their rights for a good five years, and by the time they've finished explaining that they can probably have their missionary and welcome."

Another nut case. Brand was beginning to recall the Dark Age saying about everyone being a little touched bar thee and me. This time, Hazel Graubart, who had taken herself off Earth to Sequoia, the farthest planet from Earth accepting colonists at the time, in a fit of pique, and had promptly tried to buy herself out of contract. It had taken her ten years, because she refused to do any work constructive enough to advance the colony—which she said was a criminal undertaking not for her to abet—and had consequently been paid minimal rates. She was a blot on Sequoia's impeccable record; that was the least troublesome of all the out-worlds.

So long as she was fit to do any work at all Sequoia had been unwilling to waste her in therapy. On prosperous Earth, where only one person in ten had to do real work, she would probably wind up in hospital under treatment for persecution mania within a few weeks.

Finally, relief—at first glance. Someone comparatively normal: a communications engineer named Waters, who had been working on the Valhallan main sub-radio installation. His professional record was excellent.

Just a moment: why was he returning ahead of contract time? Brand's forehead, briefly smooth, folded back into a frown. The answer came up promptly. A racist. A red-

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headed man who had got hold of the ancient speculation that red hair was a Neanderthal inheritance, and who felt in consequence much as did that character in the old diatonic operetta who could trace his ancestry back to a primordial protoplasmic globule and was therefore born sneering. Valhallans were mostly of Lappish stock, with some Siberian Eskimo and Mongolian; they were on the short side, and stocky. And Waters had expressed his racist opinions once too often.

"There's only one chance for us," Brand said with a cynicism not entirely feigned. "We'll just have to hope that this creature on Tantalus has its own problems."

"What?" His remembrancer looked at him, startled.

"Nothing . . . Hasn't Locations found me any of Voidech's staff yet?"

"I'm holding contacts with four of them," the girl said.

"Good. I have some questions I want to put to them before I get in touch with Veliz at Project Tantalus.

The girl hesitated. Then, greatly daring, she said, "May I ask if something is wrong? You seem upset."

"I am," Brand admitted. "I was assuming we would detect the alleged non-human passenger quite simply, because he, or she, would somehow behave in a peculiar manner. That ship is a traveling mental asylum, my dear, and there isn't anyone aboard you'd expect to make like a normal person. And with everybody from Sensiservice to a bunch of Circle Believers barking at my heels, I'm starting to wonder whether I know what a normal person would look like if I saw one."

VII

"YOU REALIZE, of course," Veliz rapped, "that you've made a complete farce of Project Tantalus? Our work is hung up, the staff can't concentrate—or else they've been diverted to this confusion pattern of yours! Ach, it's absurd!" He slammed his open palm down on his desk.

There was no trace of defensiveness in the expressions of either of the Gamaliel couple. They failed to reply, but at his most optimistic Veliz could not have imagined they were silent because they were embarrassed; they conveyed the impression that the subject wasn't worth arguing about.

"We *got* a scanner into that exowomb station," Veliz pursued. "Did we find anything to suggest a facsimile human had been secreted there? Did we? We did not! We found the typical features of grubber production—foetuses, larval stage, and adults in training. Also we lost several scanners in the process."

Harry gave Lynette a weary smile. Still neither of them said anything.

The pause was broken by Geza Randolph's voice from the communicator on the desk, high-pitched with excitement. "Chief, a call from Earth! It's Master Brand!"

Veliz flinched visibly. "*Now* what a hornet's nest you've stirred up!" he said accusingly to the Gamaliels. "You know who he is, don't you?"

"One of the Powers of Earth," Harry grunted. "Don't keep him waiting!"

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The point went home. Veliz closed his eyes convulsively and whispered to Geza, "Put him through to me."

The screen lit. A long-faced man with crisp dark hair and a sharp, prying nose appeared in it. He said without preamble, "I need some data on Project Tantalus, especially on the Tantalus itself. I've spoken with four survivors of Voidech's original expedition, and I want to be brought up to date on several points."

Veliz, overcome, gulped air and nodded. He said faintly, "But wouldn't it be better to check the machine-stored material we already—?"

"If I thought it was better I'd do it," Brand snapped. "First— Are you listening? Good! First, I want to know the relative proportions of your effort devoted to the various aspects of your research."

Veliz struggled to organize words coherently. He muttered, "Well, we have about half the staff engaged on the study of the gross-physical processes. We watch—uh—breeding, and utilization of organic and inorganic materials, and analyze the entropic pattern of the whole of the Tantalus's activity. As you probably know, it's—very crudely—a cross between mankind and the ant, existing in about one and a half million separate individual organisms united by a telepathic bond. It—uh—farms the lower species, combats predators such as the bearhounds, maintains forests, irrigates, utilizes natural rivers for that and for—uh—breeding . . ."

"Come on!" Brand urged as the words momentarily dried up.

Veliz wiped his face. "Yes. Well . . . The rest of the staff is divided between administration and maintenance on the one hand—we have computer capacity of about five megabrain, an enormous scanning system covering nearly as much of the planet as the Tantalus itself, and naturally with a staff of eighty we need—"

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"I know that! What's the 'other hand' you were going to refer to?"

"That's the least fruitful area. It's our attempt to pin down the telepathic force the Tantalum emits to control its various—uh—cells."

"Expatriate on that."

Again Veliz wiped his face. "The Tantalum is physically extended on every biological level. Even its breeding is externalized; it builds hollow mounds with a water supply, pipes in necessary nutriment, and brings its—uh—ova to birth in exowombs. Most of its sub-units are mere biological mechanisms; they don't even eat, but have to imbibe and store for digestion specially secreted nutrient fluids. They have quite complex nervous systems, however, not quite at the human level but close to it. Uh—the physical basis of the Tantalum's personality seems to reside in what we call 'brain-cells' which are large, sluggish, quadrupedal organisms generally located at exowomb stations, possibly to ensure that the developing embryos are continually impinged on by strong telepathic emanations."

"This situation has been substantially the same since Voidech made the first study of Tantalus—correct?"

Veliz nodded. He was beginning to get over his first violent apprehension. "Apart from two newly-evolved sub-unit types, the salamander and the grubber, which seem to have been inadvertently suggested by us. Before Voidech arrived the Tantalum was unaware of the practical uses of fire; now it breeds units with a thick epidermis secreting a continual flow of water, capable of enduring temperatures up to five hundred degrees for periods of almost an hour, and uses them to make and maintain fires for several purposes—baking clay bricks, defense against bearhounds, and so on. And the grubbers are mole-like creatures, with the aid of which the Tantalum is investigating natural inorganic resources. It needs a good many trace elements, including some not involved in

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terrestrial biology, and before we arrived it had no conception of getting these from ores."

"How do you communicate with the Tantalans? It obviously didn't speak if it was telepathic before we found it."

"It's sensitive to sound, though its powers of discrimination are lower than ours in that area, and Voidech's second expedition brought some vodors here. The Tantalans figured out their function with little trouble, and now has a vocabulary of some fifty or sixty thousand words, including some extremely sophisticated abstract concepts. Its intelligence is generally estimated at equivalent to IQ 160."

"Does it have special vodor-controlling talking units?"

"No—just some modified 'brain-cells.' We know where they all are, and have permanent radio links with them."

In the screen, Brand rubbed his chin. "Let's go back to the matter of telepathy. I want to settle a problem that's bothering me. Have we any proof that—even though we're incapable of sensing the Tantalans's emanations—the corollary is also true?"

For the first time since Brand came on the communicator, the Gamaliels showed signs of interest in the conversation. They exchanged glances with a hint of worry.

Veliz took several seconds to reach his answer. "Why—to be honest, Master Brand, no, we don't know!"

"Then find out!" Brand instructed. "Somehow! Rig a programme which will allow you to deduce the answer. I need that information more urgently than anything else."

Harry got to his feet. "Lynette and I will start on it at once!" he promised, and they went out.

"Who was that whose voice I heard?" Brand demanded. The Gamaliels had not been in range of the pickup. Veliz explained quickly.

"Excellent," Brand commented. "Now, along what lines have you been tackling this telepathy problem?"

"Any that occurred to us," Veliz said hopelessly. "We've

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brought hunchbacks here—like the Gamaliels. We've brought anyone who showed even limited signs of supra-rational talent, with no success at all. Also we've experimented with every type of detector of all known fields of force from gravity to—"

"All right, save that. You've come to my next major question. Why did you send for the *Fulmar* instead of waiting for the next scheduled ship?"

Veliz's lower lip quivered. He had been waiting for this.

"It was Caversham, Master Brand!" His voice reeked of self-excusals. "That man was insufferable! He—"

"Did he refuse to co-operate in your experiments?"

"We have no experiments for such people. They're simply brought here to be—uh—to be exposed, like a photographic plate to X-rays. We watch them continually, of course, and analyze their dreams, and set psychological tests to reveal any Tantalus-type reactions—but this wasn't the trouble with Caversham." Veliz leaned closer to the screen, trying to make his tone forceful now. "That man's a saboteur, Master Brand. He takes delight in only one thing: undermining people's confidence. He mocks, he jeers, he insults people, he gets on their nerves. I could get fifty of my staff to tell you the same thing. Naturally, we couldn't keep up with our work; I judged Project Tantalus too important to become a toy for one man who wasn't even a trained researcher, so I asked for a ship to be diverted and take him off."

"And while the *Fulmar* was on Tantalus, the passengers and crew were also 'exposed,' as you put it, to the environment?"

"Yes, of course. If any single human being is telepathically sensitive, this is where we'll find out."

"Did any of them require persuasion to come and be shown around?"

"Yes, one of them. I think she was a Circle missionary. The others were very eager. Tantalus, after all, is a well-

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known planet, and the home of the only known non-human intelligence. *Most* people are eager to see it."

"The missionary eventually came with the rest?"

"Certainly."

"Right," Brand grunted. "Link this circuit into your scanning system. I want a guided tour of Tantalus and the Tantalalan. But put someone unimportant on the job, because from *you* I want the answer to my question about the Tantalalan reading human minds."

VIII

CAPTAIN WONG searched Cornelius's face for a clue to the reason for what was happening, but the administrator remained inscrutable.

At length he sighed. "Very well. I can scarcely quarrel with the Powers of Earth. The *Fulmar* is to remain in this orbit indefinitely. Meantime we starve?"

Cornelius noted the rebellion in the tone, but answered with his customary urbanity. "All necessary provisions for the comfort of yourself, your crew and the passengers are in hand. Supplies will be sent aboard shortly, additional power will be furnished—everything is being taken care of."

"Not quite," Captain Wong countered. "Are you not aware that I've had to undergo anti-Earth treatment?"

"Yes, we know." Cornelius faced him, unblinking.

"And you're insisting on this, regardless?"

"I'm sorry." For the first time Cornelius showed signs of perturbation. "I'm only relaying you a decision which I did not make. And I'm unable to give you the grounds for it."

"Very well. Will that be all?" Wong made to cut the circuit. Cornelius, however, raised a hand.

"One more thing. During the next few hours there will be noises and probably some hard radiation at the skin of your ship. We are installing sensors and scanners. I have to warn you about this in case your passengers are alarmed. Inform them that there is nothing to be scared of."

"It would take a more convincing actor than me to per-

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suade them not to be frightened," Wong said stonily. "What are the sensors and scanners for? May I know?"

"You may assume that they fulfil their usual purposes," Cornelius retorted. "Now I must break off. I'll be in touch again when Master Brand is ready to interview the personnel."

The screen blanked. Wong looked from it along the banked instruments of the control cabin, towards the viewport, and closed his eyes. The viewport was aligned away from Earth. But the parent planet was there nonetheless. Watching him.

"Caversham!" said Tanya viciously.

All heads turned. Except Relly, who had departed to his cabin muttering something vague about trying to replan his calculations to bring them within the capacity of the ship's own computers, the passengers had drifted here to the bar, one by one, to get away from the looming bulk of Earth beyond the viewport in the observation saloon. The viewport had been closed on Captain Wong's discreet suggestion, but there was still the knowledge of the planet's presence, and it made the bar preferable.

Even Sister Dorcas, recovered from her fit of hysteria, had slunk in to join the rest, and now sat timidly in a corner, her white, pinched face set in a disapproving expression.

Caversham, who was relaxing in a deep chair with a stein of beer, moved last in response to the mention of his name. He did not speak his answer—merely cocked an eyebrow.

"What makes you tick?" Tanya demanded. "If you tick at all!"

"If you listen carefully, you'll hear me," Caversham said. "Why do you want to know?"

As always, the level, faintly mocking voice rasped Tanya's nerves. She jerked forward on her own seat. "You were saying some nasty things about us and machines a little while ago—remember? But you *are* a machine."

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Nia Welk/Florens glanced, bewildered, from Tanya to Caversham and back.

"Do go on," Caversham invited.

"Well . . ." Tanya clutched at the air with one hand. "Can't you show *some* reaction to this crazy mess? Aren't you affected at *all* by being locked up in a space-going jailhouse by some anonymous authoritarian *dictator*?"

"You mean I'm not in a state of panic," Caversham suggested. "And that worries you? I don't see why. According to Waters,"—he gestured towards the communications engineer, who sat facing him—"we're here by direct order of one of the Powers of Earth, and no slick buzzing machine is going to overrule him and let us go. So we have to wait it out. And if we have to wait, we might as well do so calmly, like civilized people."

"Civilized!" That was Florens, almost jumping to his feet with fury. "From you that's hilarious! You're the most foul-mouthed person I ever met—you look like a hairy savage, what's more!"

"I don't mind looking like a human being," Caversham murmured. "Most people prefer to look as much like a sterile machine as possible. Maybe we should try building machines with follicles on their cases, and restore the correct priority." He emptied his stein of beer in a single huge swallow and set it aside. "I resent your remarks, candidly. I didn't think it civilized of you to raise a fist to me."

"Why don't you shut up, all of you?" Hazel Graubart snapped. "It's hard enough to keep calm anyway, without your continual wrangling!"

"I agree!" Unexpectedly, Sister Dorcas spoke up from her isolated corner, her back very straight, her hands folded in her black lap. "Sister Tanya, please don't object to our brother remaining calm. It's our *duty* to remain calm and controlled in the face of adversity."

"Well!" Tanya sneered. "An ally for you, Caversham!"

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Caversham eyed her briefly before rounding on Sister Dorcas. "What became of your duty, then, when you came moaning into the observation saloon? Did you think your old chum God had let you down?"

Sister Dorcas's cheeks flushed scarlet. She said, "Brother, I—"

"There's no insanity in my family," Caversham cut in. "I don't want your brotherhood, or any other relationship with you, come to that."

He paused, turning his bright eyes fiercely on Tanya. "Or you, incidentally!"

Florens slapped his thigh. "*The* most foul-mouthed person I ever met! Do you insult every woman you meet—out of habit?"

"Those that deserve it," Caversham grunted.

"Brother!" Sister Dorcas, trying to regain the attention of the others, had got to her feet. "It's not fair, it's not fair! Because I'm a weak vessel, that's no reason to blaspheme. I confess freely, I suffered a lapse of faith—but the moment I realized it, I prayed for strength and it came to me."

"Out of an automatic therapy kit," Caversham said. "From a machine. The same place as all these other dehumanized puppets look for their God."

"Now look here, Caversham," Waters exclaimed, also rising and coming to stand beside Sister Dorcas, "I know something about propaganda techniques—it's in my field. And I can see how you're deliberately setting out to foment disagreement among us, even if the non-specialists can't. Stop it! We're going through a trying enough time as it is."

Caversham looked him up and down with insulting thoroughness. "Check me if I'm wrong, Waters. I was sitting here saying nothing, quietly drinking a stein of beer, and I was spoken to in an aggressive fashion—right? I inquired if I was annoying Tanya by keeping calm—right? Apparently I was.

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So if I keep quiet I annoy Tanya and if I speak my mind I annoy you!"

Waters put out a feeble hand. "Now just a—!"

"It seems the only course open to me is my usual one." Caversham scrambled out of his chair. "And that's to please myself, not bothering about idiots who make themselves over in the image of their machines!"

"If you're leaving," Tanya called, "hurry up! It'll give us a welcome chance to recharge our accumulators."

"Do you think that's funny?" Caversham inquired.

There was suddenly some quality in his voice which imposed silence. It wasn't menace. It could scarcely be eagerness for an answer. Yet all his hearers had to accept that his question was serious.

His eyes bored into Tanya's. Seconds crept by.

"Well? I'm waiting."

Defensively, she shrugged. "You said we're behaving like machines. Not very original. I'd said the same about you. It's a subject I don't think worth pursuing, anyway."

"You wouldn't, I guess. But—look!" He shot out his hand and caught Tanya's wrist. The ends of her fingers gleamed mirror-bright with chrome nail-cosmetic. "These are your terminals, aren't they? You plug them into a socket when you recharge your accumulators!"

Frightened, she snatched her hand free. "I—I don't see what you mean!"

"Of course not. You're long past the point of no return. And so are men who go for women like you—warm machines, offering automatic sexual therapy with shiny chrome plating and slick colorful plastic trim. Your nails reflect your mind. You don't paint them a vital color—blood-red, or leaf-green, something associated with living creatures. You choose polished metal. You said you have a block against medication, and that means a block against helping a fellow-human in distress! If you *were* a machine, probably you could have

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feelings built into you. But you're a woman—you ought to have them from birth."

Florens had drawn his invisible mantle of pomposity close around him. Wearing it, he advanced to confront Caversham.

"We've had enough of your insufferable behavior," he declared. "You're taking cruel advantage of the predicament we're in to use us as a captive audience for your crackpot views. You're an obsessional neurotic, and what you need is remedial therapy!"

"Are you talking to me, or Sister Dorcas?" Caversham asked sweetly. "We have aboard this ship her, who makes a profession of proselytizing in the name of Jesus the Time Traveler—the captain and crew who are by definition controlled psychotics—Tanya, who is nymphomaniac and grows restless for want of a new man after this brief voyage—Relly, who can hardly put two sentences together because he thinks like a computer—Waters, who left your own home world because of his socialist views—"

"Shut up!" Waters moved towards him, fists folding.

Unperturbed, Caversham stared him down, his level words continuing without a break. "Your mistress, Florens, who is so silent and colorless as barely to qualify for human status—yourself, Florens, so conditioned by the lack of inches you resent Waters commenting that you can't face this crucial visit to Earth in the company of anyone with a more vivid personality—"

"Shut up!" Unable to bear the prospect of him adding her to his list of definitions, Hazel Graubart shouted at him.

"I was coming to you! Sequoia is the pleasantest and most satisfactorily developed of the outworlds, and you're a refugee from it, or rather from your own masochistic needs. Which makes me—"

"If you don't shut up, I'll kill you," Tanya said between white lips.

"I was going to say," Caversham barked, "that that makes

me, as a mere 'obsessional neurotic,' by far the sanest person herel"

He stamped out.

The tension broke with the slamming of the door. They moved randomly, as though to prove to themselves that they still could, having temporarily forgotten how while Caversham's tirade hypnotized them. They said, equally at random, things like, "What an awful man! Hairy savage is right!"

Tanya looked at Florens speculatively. He had at least made some effort to stand up to Caversham, whereas Waters, who had at first appeared the most capable of the men here, had needed a lead to provoke him into the same action.

She looked at Florens's mistress. Yes, there for once Caversham was probably right; she was much too colorless to cause any trouble. Without making the gesture obvious, she lowered the front of her lounging suit a little on her bosom, and went to compliment Florens on what he had said.

A few minutes, and the door slid aside. The crew was there.

"A message from Master Brand," she said. "You are requested to present yourselves in turn at the entrance to the control section for personal interviews with him over a sound and vision link."

"What's this in aid off?" Florens snapped; Tanya's compliments had been skillfully turned, and he was feeling twice his own size.

"Does it matter?" Hazel Graubart countered. "Here's a chance to say what we think of the way we're being treated, and not even the Powers of Earth are going to stop *me* from speaking my mind!"

IX

"Is THERE anything further you want me to arrange as a result of your inquiries on Tantalus, Master Brand?" Cornelius was becoming haggard under the strain of intercepting all the complaints and queries being shot at Brand from parties interested in the delay to the *Fulmar*.

"I didn't learn anything significant out there," Brand grunted. "Bar one thing—an obvious line of research has been being neglected for forty years. And there's nothing we can do to cure that from the Earthside end. Is everything ready aboard the ship now?"

"Yes, completely." Cornelius indicated a man standing shyly to one side of and a little behind him. "This is Leading Engineer Gropius, who's been supervising the work."

Brand invited the man to speak with a jerk of his head.

"We've converted one of the forward power compartments to serve as an interview chamber," the engineer said, the words coming quickly as though under high pressure. "Apart from the communications equipment, all of which is continually monitored by data-analysis machines and will signal any departure from a standard reaction pattern, there are scanners and sensors which will study the mental processes of the subjects, their metabolism on every level, the very chemical constitution of their bones. The slightest anomaly should be revealed at once. We're already monitoring the effluents from the ship—sewage, used air, and so forth—looking for abnormal compounds."

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"Without success," Brand suggested. It wasn't a question.

"I'm afraid that's so," Gropius muttered.

"Well, we can try it, I guess," Brand said, stretching his arms to fullest extent and working his back muscles to ease the stiffness of long sitting. "But unfortunately the only unique emanation of the Tantalus is one that's defied our best minds for forty-odd years. I'm not expecting miracles."

"That's Hazel Graubart," murmured the remembrancer. "The record shows her reaction to the news that you were to interview the passengers: quote, 'Here's a chance to say what we think of the way we're being treated, and not even the Powers of Earth are going to stop me from speaking my mind.' On which she insisted that she be the first subject."

Brand studied the sullen face in the screen. Those ten years of privation—self-imposed—on Sequoia had left their traces around the woman's mouth and eyes. She looked older than her chronological age. At present she was displaying impatience; the circuit had only been closed in one direction, and she could not yet see Brand.

"Anomalies?" Brand asked Gropius.

"Yes! Since she entered the cabin, we've detected very faint traces of a non-human aromatic compound in the ventilation system. It's strongest near her mouth."

Brand started forward in his chair with an oath, only to be overtaken by a frantic apology. "Sorry, Master Brand! A check identifies it as the smell of a Sequoian poverty-level foodstuff, intensity consistent with intake seven days ago. The name reads 'garlic'."

"Next time, make the check before you tell me," Brand requested sourly. "All right, let her see me."

As he had anticipated, the appearance of his image in the screen facing Hazel Graubart took the force out of her intended tirade; the Powers of Earth, after all, had some status. It was in a comparatively timid voice that she inquired,

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"Are—are you Master Brand? Is it you who's ordered us shut up in this ship?"

"That's right," Brand said curtly.

"Well, I think it's disgracefull It's an infringement of personal rights!"

"Yes," Brand said.

"I demand to be allowed to land on Earth! I'm Earthborn, I have every right to return to my own home!"

"Yes," Brand repeated. "If you'll let me get a word in edgewise, you may be able to get home sooner rather than later. Do you know why the *Fulmar* is being held?"

"Well—Waters said . . ." She put her hand to her mouth, as though afraid of saying something she should keep to herself.

"I know about Waters tapping the subspace circuits," said Brand wearily. "He won't manage it again—we're operating under maximum security now. In any case, he didn't say anything except that it was being done on my orders. What, in your view, was the reason for those orders?"

"I—don't know."

"You think it's being done *without* reason?"

"No, I— Oh!" A light dawned on the lined face. A look of suppressed fury succeeded the revelation. "Unless those bastards at Sequoia have sent some lying nonsense through to you about what they're doing out there! I didn't make any secret of it when I told them what I'd say when I got home—the criminal, filthy, immoral way they run their planet, and the lies they tell to dupe people like me into going to join their colony!"

"So we're holding up the *Fulmar*, with everyone aboard, to stop you publishing the truth about Sequoia—correct?"

Her breath was coming in labored pants now. She had sat forward in her chair. "If that's it, I tell you now—it won't work! I sweated ten mortal years out there to buy out of the contract I was conned into signing, and another few days

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won't break me, even with that bastard Caversham to keep me company!"

Florens took his place with the dignity appropriate to one undertaking the first delicate unofficial diplomatic mission to Earth after more than a century of strained relations between the parent world and Valhalla. He wore a formal executive's costume of rust-brown and gray, and an expression like a carved mask.

"I neither know nor care why you've arbitrarily imprisoned us aboard the ship!" he barked in reply to Brand's question. "What I do know is this: unless I'm released forthwith, I shall stay on Earth precisely long enough when I *do* get down to locate a Valhalla-bound ship and book my passage home! I was under the mistaken impression that the arrogance which led us to sever contact with your government was a thing of the past, and I've worked for decades in my party and in the government of Valhalla to bring about a rapprochement. We don't approve of tyrannical, dictatorial, authoritarian behavior, whether by one planet towards another or by one individual to another—no matter if he calls himself a Power of Earth or not!"

All of this was true, and the effect on Earth-Valhalla relations was the worst aspect of this business. Brand said mildly, hoping that Florens was accessible to reason, "I'm sure you'll agree that this action must have been taken with good cause."

"Whatever the reason, it doesn't concern me or my planet," Florens shrugged. "This is an Earth-owned vessel, which legally makes it part of Earth. I demand the exercise of the traditional diplomatic privileges for myself and my wife."

"We genuinely regret the inconvenience, and I assure you that you'll admit its necessity when we're able to reveal the grounds for the delay. Meantime, every comfort possible—"

"No comfort in the galaxy," Florens said viciously, "could

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compensate for having to stomach some of the people we're penned up with—in particular, that hairy savage who calls himself Caversham!”

Nia Welk/Florens sat in the chair so as to make herself as small as possible, her round face pale, her hands close together in her lap.

“Yes, I suppose there must be a good reason,” she agreed in response to Brand’s question. “I mean, my—my husband has explained to me that the trouble between Valhalla and Earth was a long time ago, and things have changed, and all the things we get taught in school are out of date . . . But I don’t see how the trouble—whatever it is—can concern us.”

“Your husband”—Brand was careful with the word—“is still of his original opinion, then?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure he is!” She looked at the screen with big anxious eyes. “Of course, he may have said something to you which makes it seem as if he . . . But right now he’s upset, naturally. Who wouldn’t be? Just being delayed isn’t so bad—it’s been a century since the trouble between our planets, and a few days won’t make much difference now. But having to contend with the other people in the ship is *very* wearing. This reporter person—Tanya Hesit—is bad enough, man-hungry the way she is. And then there’s Waters, who has these insulting views—but Caversham is absolutely awful!”

“I’m beginning to be very interested in Caversham,” Brand murmured. “I look forward to his turn in the interview room. Any anomalies so far, Gropius?”

“Not yet. We caught something from Florens, but it was a tranquilizing compound he’d taken before talking to you. And his wife wears a perfume we’re trying to identify. I think it’ll check out as a common Valhallan substance.”

“Hmmm . . . All right. Remembrancer, who’s next?”



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Tanya Hesit had accepted a position lower on the list than she would have liked because she needed time to prepare for this encounter. She had dressed and made up with the utmost care; in her experience, men who held Caversham's views were anachronisms, and the vast majority of the male sex—up to and including Powers of Earth—were susceptible to contemporary glamor. She had a figure which was overhauled by highly-paid specialists every time there was a swing in masculine taste, and she had packaged it in a skimpy suit of the dark red which suited her best of all colors; she had plated her nails with gold, gilded her hair so that it gleamed like a coronet, and traced her surface veins with indigo-blue. Caversham would probably have said that this was another attempt to imitate a machine, by decorating the skin with printed circuitry—but *damn* Caversham! She had no need to take notice of *his* opinion!

"I have several hypotheses about the reason for our being jailed in the ship," she found herself saying when the interview was well along; Brand had skillfully parried all her jabs at his masculinity, and rather than continue on a route to sure defeat against so practiced an opponent she had reverted to her other speciality. "But like all my opinions, they're contracted to Sensiservice—who will get them in full measure the moment I'm allowed to land."

"A certain Pigoyan from Sensiservice has been bothering me," Brand murmured. "His theory would appear to be that I have been bought by one of your rivals to frustrate some scandalous revelation you're eager to spring on us."

"Are you implying that my travelogues are mere scandalous—uh—?" Tanya was at a loss for the right word to conclude the sentence. "I'll be delighted to disillusion you."

"I've taken some of your productions," Brand told her.

"Well!" Involuntarily flattered, Tanya had to preen. "I didn't realize I had such a distinguished audience."

"Skip the mock-modesty. In them, I've never found more

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than a core of publicly available information disguised with a whipped-cream dressing of sensationalism."

"Name of disaster!" Tanya sat bolt upright. "Now see here! I enjoy a very high standing in my field, and I've achieved it by my thorough personal research, my persistence, my individual style—"

"Splendid. Since your productions are inimitable, no one is likely to scoop you in a few days, and Pigoyan is denigrating you unnecessarily by implying that somebody can. Why are you so eager to be landed, then? I'd have thought it would delight you to be at the heart of an incident like this—after all, whatever you may think of the reasons for it, one thing's plain: it's important if it involves me."

The mask of glamor dropped from her face, and he had a glimpse of something feral behind it. Her voice, too, had a wild-beast quality as she almost hissed, "I want out of this ship because my nerves won't stand that insufferable bastard Caversham! I'm going to make him sorry for what he's said! I'm going to make him eat those words when I get to Earth!"

"I imagine," Brand murmured to no one in particular, "that Caversham will appear last, on principle—may even refuse to appear at all. A shame. I grow distinctly more eager to make this man's acquaintance with every new datum I get."

Shofee came in; Brand had seen little of him in the past few hours, as he had been clearing some local traffic problem due to the *Fulmar's* presence in orbit. "Master Brand! I have an urgent message about the captain and crew of the *Fulmar*. The strain is getting severe, especially on Wong."

"I'm being as quick as I can," sighed Brand. "Next!"



X

THERE WAS something defensive in Waters's manner when he took his place in the interview room. It lasted only a moment, however, past the point at which he saw Brand on the screen and noted his physical makeup. He relaxed visibly.

Looking for a superman, Brand told himself. *Seeing me as I am, he can retreat to his usual position of superiority.*

"No, I have no idea why we're being held," the red-haired man said. "I would have, if I'd had the sense to keep my knowledge of the messages passing between here and Earth to myself."

Only he had preferred to impress his companions by blurting out his information, Brand glossed. He refrained from pointing out that they would have discovered someone was eavesdropping the moment they installed their scanners—nothing that happened within the *Fulmar* was overlooked by the inquisitive devices now. He waited for Waters to finish.

"Not that it makes any odds to me," Waters pursued. "I was thrown off Valhalla, although my work was perfectly satisfactory, so I wouldn't expect to be back on Earth for some time yet in the normal run of events. I might almost say I was enjoying this—it's a pleasure to see that pompous little Florens squirming."

"Almost?" Brand prompted.

"But for Caversham, I'm certain I would enjoy it." Waters's face darkened. "The cocksure upstart!"

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"Born sneering!" Brand muttered as Waters's image dissolved. "Gropius, any anomalies yet?"

"The Hesit woman had loaded herself with aphrodisiac perfumes," Gropius replied. "I don't know whether she thought there was a scent attachment on the communicator or whether it was just force of habit. By contrast, Waters emits virtually no odors of any kind; his skin is coated with an odor-suppressor."

"Nothing else?"

"No. Chemically, everyone so far has checked out human without qualification."

Beloved Sister Dorcas gave no reply at all when Brand first stated his question. It took considerable urging to pry her opinion from her; when it came, it was so much more egoistical even than Hazel Graubart's that Brand was shaken.

"I would not presume to question the ways of the Almighty," she said with a sanctimonious twitch of her mouth. "I hope—hope, only—that it is a trial of my faith, and that I shall emerge from it better armored against the immorality of infidel Earth, to which I have been called as a light in spiritual darkness."

When Brand recovered his breath, he inquired with deceptive sweetness, "May one know how your faith is being tried, Sister Dorcas?"

"What a pleasure to encounter someone with a due sense of the proprieties!" she said. "Really, the situation here is—"

"Yes, yes," Brand cut in hastily. "You were about to say?"

"Why—everything is a trial to me: the behavior of my companions is positively indecent! Tanya Hesit, whom I have to *force* myself to call 'Sister Tanya' although I know all mankind should live in brotherly love together—she wears red, not unsuited to a Scarlet Woman—"

"Anything in *particular*?"

"Oh, the deliberate blasphemy of that unholy Caversham—"



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whom I will *not* call 'Brother,' not after he's shown himself in the colors of evil!"

"Anomaly, Master Brand," Gropius reported.

"For the missionary? She's the last I'd have imagined the Tantalans might— What kind of anomaly?"

"Absence of gonads, and in fact the whole reproductive system. Her hormones are as you might say neuter."

"Hmmm . . . Look into it anyway, but I think you'll find all female Circle missionaries are that way; they're tectogenetically altered to keep them—ah—free from the sins of the flesh."

Relly maintained an air of dogged determination despite the uncertainty which he always displayed in the company of strangers—Powers of Earth or not.

"No, and I fail to see how it can concern me," was his reply to Brand's routine question. "If the captivity of several people aboard a cramped and uncomfortable starship in orbit is deemed necessary by the Powers of Earth, I'm not going to quarrel with that decision. But I must *insist* on being given access to adequate computing capacity. I came here at great personal inconvenience to carry out important pure research at the Foundation of Advanced Mathematics, and I'm wasting my time and getting very frustrated with nothing but a portable calculator to handle my work—absolutely useless for such a task."

Brand hesitated. It would be quite simple to hitch the communicator in Relly's cabin to a subspace circuit and then connect up to an Earthside computer. And the Foundation of Advanced Math was an organization for which he had much respect; he preferred not to upset its members.

But—no. What the Tantalans might gain by copying Relly was enigmatic, but there were unweighable risks in letting any of the passengers use an Earthside computer.

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"I'll look into the possibilities," he prevaricated. "I'm grateful, I must say, for the calm fashion in which you're accepting the necessity for this delay. Is anything else—apart from the delay itself—troubling you?"

Relly looked thoughtful, as if the question had not occurred to him. At length he said, "No, I don't believe so. I keep to my cabin much of the time, naturally, and this enables me to avoid the man who does disturb me: Caversham."

"So Caversham has managed to annoy everyone else aboard, except the captain and crew," Brand mused aloud to Cornelius. "And now, finally, we come down to him."

"On the surface, he's the prime suspect," Cornelius suggested.

"Oh, certainly! He was on Tantalus for—I forget how long, but a very long time compared with any of the others, and it's far more probable that the Tantalus chose to replicate a subject it could study at length rather than one it picked at random from a group only staying a day on the planet. But he seems deliberately to be making himself stand out, which militates against the facile assumption . . . Look, while I'm talking to him, go through to Veliz again, will you? I want to know what steps they're taking to establish whether the Tantalus is or is not sensitive to human thoughts."

After all he had heard, both from the passengers and from Veliz, Brand expected to find Caversham deliberately aggressive and loud-mouthed. If the image which had gone up on the screen had shown the man naked, standing on his head and yodeling an obscene song, he would not have been surprised.

Instead, Caversham appeared formally attired, promptly at the moment requested, and faced his inquisitor with a cheerful smile.



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Brand took a moment out to consider this, and Caversham's smile broadened to a grin.

"Don't tell me, Master Brand—let me back a hunch. I'd say that after talking to everyone else here with me, you expected me to refuse to talk to you, to slouch unmannerly in the chair if I did turn up, and to mutter dark anarchical insults about the Powers of Earth."

In spite of himself, Brand felt a smile come to his face matching the other's. He said, "Are you a hunchback? I was under the impression you were suspected of some other more *recherché* talent."

"I wish I was a hunchback," Caversham said. "I've just come off Tantalus, as you know, and the nicest people I met there—the *only* nice people—were the hunchbacks, like Harry Gamaliel. But it doesn't take supra-rational talent to figure out something as simple as the guess I just made. I—well, I like to regard myself as a person who hasn't resigned his critical faculties to a machine the way most human beings seem to have done. And I'm very glad to meet you, by the way, Master Brand. You—let's face it—are among the few members of the species who have kept machines in their rightful place, as tools and servants."

Brand sensed the danger of being lulled into too-ready acceptance of this man—the prime suspect, as he reminded himself—by flattery which was particularly sweet to his ears. He said, "Clearly, you class yourself above your companions in the *Fulmar*!"

Caversham shrugged. "Only insofar as they've handed over part of the individual's born responsibility to computers and such. Not the way Waters makes out he's superior—may I be preserved from that!"

"But you don't object to needling them for amusement, even when you know the atmosphere is getting claustrophobic and potentially explosive."

"I never stop needling people," Caversham admitted. "I'm

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sorry—this is a bad situation to indulge the habit in. But I resent your saying I do it for amusement. I do it to see if I can jolt them out of their mechanical-doll routines.”

“Do you belong to some philosophical persuasion which enjoins this?”

“My own. And I don’t proselytize. I’m an individual, not a follower of a school.” Caversham chuckled, as though the statement had some private association for him.

“I see. Well . . .” Brand rubbed his chin. “Since you have this faculty for accurate guessing, even though you don’t claim to be a hunchback, may I know what you think is the reason why the *Fulmar* is being detained?”

“That seems pretty simple to me, too,” Caversham grunted. “Apart from one thing, this voyage has been a routine one. The most likely reason for our attracting such distinguished attention on reaching Earth is the anomalous feature—I’m a great one for anomalies, by the way. You might say I collect them, and when I can’t do that I make my own.”

“Please: stick to the point.” Brand felt an itch of premonition in the top of his brain.

“The diversion to Tantalus to take me off,” Caversham said. “That must have something to do with it.”

Brand tried not to frown. He said, “Can you suggest in what way it’s connected?”

“No, I can’t. Or rather, I could make so many guesses it seems ridiculous.”

“Go on.”

“Are you serious?” Caversham cocked a bushy eyebrow. “Name of disaster, I see you are! Okay. Picking the highest probabilities, then—” He raised his hand and began to count off points on his fingers.

“The one thing special about this voyage: the visit to Tantalus. The one thing special about Tantalus: the Tantalus itself. The thing most special about the Tantalus: its power of telepathy or whatever it may be. The thing most special



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about the telepathy: the fact that no human technique suffices to detect it."

"What do you deduce from all this?" Despite his best efforts to control it, Brand heard his voice shaking.

"Hmmm . . ." Caversham combed at his beard with his fingers. "Possibly that the *Fulmar* might contain—might be—some sort of telepathic amplifier to relay information about Earth to the Tantalans. . . ?" His tone was dubious. "No, that sounds unconvincing, somehow. Not the ship, then: one of the people aboard the ship, because the Tantalans was entirely operating on the organic level before it started mining metals and using fire after contact with humans."

His jaw dropped in almost a parody of astonishment.
"Me?"

Brand gave a harsh, forced laugh. "Fascinating, I must say! I hope you don't share this delightful theory with any of your companions—I can imagine it having disastrous effects on, say, Sister Dorcas. Very well, that will be all. Thank you."

He was sweating when he broke the circuit. Almost pleading with his eyes, he asked a mute question of Gropius.

"No anomalies," the engineer muttered. "Chemically he's completely human, and there's nothing in his brainwaves or anywhere else that departs significantly from the average run of the race."

Brand sat silent. For the very first time he was completely aware of the cleft stick in which not only he, but the whole of his species, had suddenly been placed.

XI

AS THE DAYS slipped by, the pattern of events had fallen into a routine. There were only recombinations of the same fundamentals: negative reports from the sensors and scanners, via Gropius; reports of complaints from outside parties, via Cornelius and Shofee according to whether they concerned the passengers or the crew and the nuisance to local space-flight the *Fulmar* represented; and a never-ending succession of failures in their attempts to isolate an imitation from the real human beings aboard the ship. Everything it occurred to them to try failed—physical tests, psychological tests, a clock-around watch on each person, looking for peculiar actions. . . .

There's likely to be violence some time, thought Brand. Passive acceptance of constricting circumstance isn't part of our modern mentality. We signal for a machine, and the circumstances change.

Even Caversham, so self-possessed, was showing the strain.

"Veliz is asking for you," Cornelius said. "Shall I put him on?"

"Go ahead," Brand sighed. The absurdity of their predicament was leaving its traces on his own features, he was sure; he could no longer present to Veliz the same confident mask of assurance as he had formerly done. But he made an effort to appear calm, at least, as the chief of Project Tantalus came on the screen.

"We have definite confirmation of the creation of a facsimile, Master Brand," Veliz said. He was extremely pale, and



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had to pause and swallow after getting out that doom-laden opening statement. "I'm sorry it took so long, but we had to operate within the limits of the pattern of confusion we're using to reduce the chance of the Tantalán finding out that we know."

"Are you still doing that?" Brand demanded. "Why?"

Veliz was taken aback. He stammered something incoherent.

"Name of disaster!" Brand clapped his hand to his forehead. "What's the *point*? How could the Tantalán not know that we know? The whole underlying assumption is that its telepathic powers are usable over interstellar distances—this is the taken-for-granted purpose of it putting part of itself aboard the *Fulmar*! So, the moment we held the ship up, the Tantalán must have realized we were at least suspicious, and all further attempts to confuse it were futile."

"I—" Veliz gave another convulsive swallow. "I don't know how we came to overlook this, Master Brand. I'm terribly sorry. But Harry Gamaliel was so insistent about . . ."

Brand filed, for reference in a few moments, an obvious deduction from all this. Aloud he said, "All right, go on."

"Well . . . We worked back through more than a year's stored data. We stumbled on clues which were individually below the attention threshold of our routine anomaly-scans, but which form a disturbing pattern when brought together. Uh—you know about Vivaldi, don't you?"

"He died on Tantalus, of some local disease. The Tantalán had requested a human body for study, and on his death-bed Vivaldi authorized that his be given to it. Yes?"

"Well—" Veliz was looking dreadfully unhappy. "We later found all sorts of human-biological compounds in various effluents, and marked them as the consequence of the Tantalán analyzing and examining Vivaldi's corpse. I'm afraid this wasn't correct. Vivaldi's corpse exists in at least two facsim-

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files as well as the original—we've located them—and this seems absolutely conclusive."

It did. Brand felt a surge of relief. At least the original hunch had been correct; they hadn't spent all this time on a false hypothesis. That, though, brought him back to the point he had filed for temporary consideration.

"The Gamaliels were going to work out a test to establish whether the Tantalus is sensitive to our thoughts even if we can't detect its. Progress?"

"We have some suggestive results. But if the Tantalus's unit aboard the *Fulmar* is in contact with the rest of the complex, this would explain it equally well. I'm sending the full details through in machine transcription for analysis by your more adequate computers."

Brand rubbed his chin. "So! That leaves us with a very limited range of alternatives, doesn't it? Which is ridiculous, when you consider that we are more advanced, more powerful, more numerous, more of almost everything than the Tantalus!" He raised fingers to count alternatives. "I could simply arrange for the *Fulmar* to be destroyed. This is an incredibly crude way of solving the problem, apart from being murder. Discard that." A second finger up. "Marginally less crudely, I could come into the open and threaten the Tantalus directly."

"I'm sorry," Veliz said thinly but determinedly. "You couldn't. Not in any way that would—uh—persuade it."

"Why not?" Brand sounded faintly surprised. "In the ultimate resort we could exterminate the creature—not, you understand, that I'm considering the idea. But we could."

"The Tantalus's one absolute difference from human intelligence is that it has no concept of personal death," Veliz pointed out. "Its only reflexive response to threats is counter-threat—never surrender."

"Name of disaster, you're right. And I'm sure it could deal with Project Tantalus at least, if not with a massed effort on

our part. Which would, in any event, leave us much worse off . . . Veliz, give me your considered opinion of the reason why the Tantalans are doing this, will you?"

"Like all living creatures, it has an expansive tendency," Veliz shrugged. "Witness the condition it made before permitting us free study facilities: that we should transport an extension of it to the southern continent and help it to establish itself."

"Is this, in your view, the pilot run for an invasion?"

Veliz did not answer.

A new line of testing, at any rate, had emerged. Brand gave orders for association and other psychological tests on the people in the *Fulmar*, designed to discover their subconscious reactions towards the notion of death. He had not been sanguine when he gave the instructions; when he saw the results, he was more depressed than ever.

Caversham, still logically the prime suspect, displayed the most normal-human responses, which was absurd. Of the remainder, Sister Dorcas refused to concede its existence—Circle teaching denied it, seeing life as one stage of a journey through time. Waters and Tanya Hesit both regarded it as a personal insult, while the Florens couple, Hazel Graubart and Rely bracketed the current Earth norm.

And Wong was looking forward to it—so much so, the machines which carried out the analysis of the results had marked his card DANGER OF SUICIDE.

Brand closed his eyes. Such a simple thing—such an easily defined problem that at first he had wondered whether it truly rated the attention of himself as one of the Powers of Earth. In the *Fulmar*, one person suspected of being a facsimile—an imitation.

But this was making a mockery of man! In over forty years of study, the best human brains had failed to trap for examination the telepathic power of the Tantalans. In the same

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short period—less than a lifetime—the Tantalán had contrived to produce so perfect a copy of a human being that the most microscopic investigation showed no flaws.

Abruptly, the whole proud edifice of human civilization seemed a sham. There was something so negligent about the way the problem had been set up—

An idea there: was it simply a problem, as one might set a problem to a rat in a laboratory to measure its intelligence? He had to face the possibility, but he hated it. It conjured up a picture in his mind of a man sneering.

For some reason, the features of the man were those of Caversham.

Logic still said that a man who had been on Tantalus for much longer than the others was the main suspect. Should he take Caversham out of the ship, to be indefinitely imprisoned, and let the others go? It would solve all the subsidiary problems, like the mounting tension between Valhalla and Earth, which at any moment might snap and set back their relations to the days, a century ago, when the daughter world had contemptuously severed all its ties with home.

And it would probably leave the central problem alone.

Lifetime. His mind jumped back to a casual concept entertained a few moments previously. How long was the life of an individual unit of the Tantalán? Checking, he discovered that this information was no help, either. One of the "brain-cells" might survive almost a century, whereas one of the working units, stressed without sleep all its adult existence, might last no more than ten years. How much like the unity of the human was that of the Tantalán! So the hair, nails, epidermis were short-lived, the nerves more durable . . .

He was still holding Wong's card marked DANGER OF SUICIDE. He tossed it aside angrily and consulted his patient computers regarding two lines of action: first, to leave Wong be and let him work out his own destiny, and second, to put him under sedation forthwith.



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The first course was instantly ruled out. The danger of suicide approached certainty in a matter of days, and the effects of that on the other people in the ship were appalling. The second was barely preferable. It would be necessary to put the crew under sedation too—she had never had captain training, which prepared the mind for the strain of sole responsibility in an emergency—and moreover, the impact on the passengers of losing the symbolic controllers of the ship would be almost as bad as in the first hypothetical case.

It was impossible simply to wait the problem out, until a solution showed of its own accord. It was impossible to act directly against the Tantalán, unless he was prepared to go to the ultimate extreme of destroying it. Anything less would simply make it into mankind's implacable enemy. And on this showing it would be the most formidable of all conceivable opponents.

Besides, it seemed like such a confession of inferiority to react to this straightforward probe—this scouting mission, this espionage—by killing the Tantalán. *The first time the only known non-human intelligence acts towards us as an equal, using us as a subject for study as we have used it, to wipe it out—could there be a clearer admission that we are small-minded, frightened, insecure?*

A scouting mission . . . The Tantalán would have been told that men existed by the billions on their various planets. It would never have seen as many as a hundred human beings together on Tantalus. Possibly it was questioning the truth of some of the things it had been told; after all, if Veliz had allowed his staff to go with this pattern of confusion designed to deceive the Tantalán long after it must have been obvious that human suspicions were aroused, it couldn't have had a very good impression of man's relative intelligence.

Brand frowned and shook his head. There was a point he had made a mental note of, associated with this. Something about the Gamaliels and what they were doing, wasn't it?

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It kept slipping his mind, eel-fashion. Painfully, he groped after it, a fog seeming to fill his brain. Now: the Gamaliels were trying to determine whether the Tantalans could read human thoughts—this question that had unaccountably been omitted from the basic research of forty years . . . No: it must have answered itself by implication, if one thought about it. After all, if the Tantalans could do this, it would have picked from the brains of the visiting humans knowledge far more sophisticated than simply a smattering of geology and the use of fire and baked brick. It wouldn't have needed human help to transport its extension to the southern continent, but would have learned how to build its own boats and how to combat the fierce, carnivorous sea-beasts which originally barred its way over the water.

He felt relieved when he had come to this conclusion. But his mind still wouldn't clear completely. It was shadowed by the knowledge that he had crashed up against a problem set centuries earlier, and had no hope of a solution.

The problem was this: given a room divided by an opaque curtain, from the other side of which comes a voice; determine by asking questions, without raising the curtain, whether the other occupant of the room is a human being or a perfect mechanical copy.

It was time to raise the curtain. He got to his feet. The passengers aboard the *Fulmar* would need someone to replace the captain and crew as a reassuring embodiment of control. It was essential to put the Wongs under sedation shortly. He would himself have to go to the ship.



XII

A DOZEN TIMES the patterns of association between the people aboard the *Fulmar* had re-formed and dissolved again. All of them needed company occasionally, for reassurance; all of them quickly found a further need for solitude because in the tense atmosphere company began to grate almost at once.

Only Caversham seemed to support the eternal waiting with more than a show of calm. Sister Dorcas, who had broken under the first shock when the ship failed to emerge from sub-space, had only partially reassembled her personal defenses; although she spent much of her time in her cabin praying, she always crept back to look for the comfort she could not find by that means. Relly was particularly poor company when he came from his cabin where he had sat gnawing his nails over his private problems, for he sat gnawing his nails in the bar also, scarcely uttering a word.

The strain had taken longest to crack Nia Welk/Florens, for she seemed to be a malleable, compliant person, totally dominated by Florens and accustomed to being ordered about by him or others.

These three—Sister Dorcas, Relly and Nia—were together in the bar, worrying at the central question and as usual failing to provide themselves with an answer.

"What the blazes is the *point* of it?" Tanya Hesit said for the dozenth time, and slapped her open palm on her thigh. "It's never going to end, the way things are going! Tests, questionnaires, that damnable bland character staring out of the screen at you—I think I shall go crazy!"

ENIGMA FROM TANTALUS

Florens, sitting next to her—they had been very close recently—cleared his throat and muttered something comforting. Waters shot him an ugly look. He had been unable to confirm his suspicions, but the weight of them was becoming intolerable.

"Somebody here could tell us the answer," he snapped.

Reflexively, they flinched. Tanya leaned forward in her chair. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"I've already told you the reason for this," Hazel Graubart cut in. "You won't listen, will you? If I could just get you to unite with me in protesting about—"

"Oh, save it!" Waters barked at her. "You've told us you think it's meant to prevent you from spreading your slanders against the government of Sequoia, and we've listened, and we've decided you're being a damned fool." He took a deep breath. "That's not what I had in mind. Consider: if it were due to anti-Valhallan prejudice on Earth"—nodding at Florens—"or to the machinations of the rival organizations to Sensiservice"—nodding at Tanya—"or anything so simple that it could be tied down to one single person aboard, there would be no need for this business of holding up the ship and plying us with questions and all the other nonsense that's been going on. I'm in communications, remember—nowadays, communications is also the science of government, and you can take it from me that the people in charge of this galaxy of ours are subtle!"

His face was reddening with the intensity of his thesis; he paused to wipe away a trace of sweat from his forehead.

"I've thought over all the overt reasons for what's been done, and not one of them stands up to close study. That drives me to an inevitable conclusion: somebody aboard the ship is not what he—or she—is pretending to be."

There was a moment of silence. Thinking he had not made himself sufficiently clear, he underlined his proposition:

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"This would explain the psychological tests, the interviews, the—"

"We're not morons!" Tanya exclaimed. "I'll grant that. Suppose you tell us who you think is masquerading, and as what?"

"If one of the Powers of Earth, with all his resources behind him, hasn't figured that out, am I expected to?" Waters retorted.

"I'm asking," Tanya said acidly. "I want to find out if you were just blowing up a smokescreen to pass the time."

Nettled, Waters set his jaw. "Very well," he muttered. "I have somebody in mind. I'm thinking of the person who's done his best to set us at each other's throats, who's kept his mouth shut and contributed nothing to our discussions, apart from insults and obscenities—you, in fact!" he finished, swinging to face Caversham.

Sardonically Caversham cocked an eyebrow. "Well, well! So that's the result of all your pondering! And just when I was coming to think that you'd finally turned your mind on, instead of waiting for some helpful computer to rush to your rescue!"

"Haven't we had enough of your cracks about men copying machines?" Florens rasped. "Let's have some proof that you practice what you preach!"

Caversham paused. Thoughtfully, he drained his stein of beer; he seemed to be virtually living on the stuff. He set the empty mug aside and gave a nod.

"Very well. Whatever I do seems to disturb you—talking, or keeping my mouth shut, both . . . Since you ask, however, I'm willing to contribute something to your discussion which is neither an insult nor an obscenity." He managed to make his level tone carry an insulting message to Waters, nonetheless.

"I'll go along with your suggestion that the inquiry is aimed at identifying someone who isn't what he seems to be," he

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continued. "I'm surprised this hasn't been plain to you earlier. I'd come to this conclusion before I had my first talk with Master Brand."

"Please!" Tanya said in a brittle voice. "Save the advertising for the interval."

"I'm simply pointing out that I've been thinking on these lines for some time, time enough to arrive at some solid theories," murmured Caversham. "And as I told Master Brand, everything narrows down to the one unusual feature of the voyage we've just made: the *Fulmar's* call on Tantalus."

"To fetch you away!" Florens snapped.

"To fetch me away, precisely," Caversham agreed. "Now the unique feature of Tantalus is the Tantalán, the unique feature of the Tantalán is its telepathy. My conclusion, which I put to Master Brand as I say, is that—correction: was at first that—someone aboard had been telepathically contacted by the Tantalán and was acting as a kind of probe, or relay."

There was almost a minute of strained silence. Tanya broke it. "Very funny!" she said in a high, unpleasant tone. "This is to get back at Waters, I presume—feeding him a specious reason for his attack on you."

Waters glared at her.

"I didn't say that," Caversham corrected. "You're thinking that I spent a longer time on Tantalus than anyone here, which is true, and you're further thinking that the Tantalán—granting it to be in control of some extension of itself aboard the *Fulmar*—would hardly come storming into the open with a gratuitous confession. But listen!"

He hunched forward. "One thing I learned, which puzzled me, out there, was that no one has ever proved that the Tantalán can't sense human thoughts, although it's been shown that humans don't react to the Tantalán's emanations. I used to wonder about this—but Veliz and I didn't get on well, and I never pressed the point.

"Suppose this theory of mine is accurate. What type of person has the Tantalum come most into contact with during its knowledge of our existence?"

"Presumably—" began Tanya, and checked herself.

"Scientists," Florens said unwillingly.

"Yes. I don't pretend to be a scientist," Caversham said.

"Just a moment!" Waters broke in. "Before we all jump off the platform you're erecting, and start thinking of Rely as possessed by an alien mind, let's have the rest of what you started to say. You talked about your original idea—the telepathic relay theory. What's your latest modification of it?"

"Quite a slight one," Caversham answered. "Haven't you noticed that the interrogation we've been subjected to is not confined to psychological tests? In that interview room there are scores of devices of examining the people who visit it, and I've seen some of them before, on Tantalus. They're for gross-physical and micro-physical analysis. If anybody enters that cabin, a complete chemical and metabolic record is made of him. And that suggests to me that they're not simply trying to find a human being under telepathic control. We've been trying for over forty years to detect and measure telepathic emanations on Tantalus, and none of these devices responds to the signals. No: they're looking for one of us to be a facsimile of a human being."

"Very ingenious, Caversham."

The voice cut the air like a sword, and their heads jerked as though pulled by strings to face the doorway. For a long instant, they had trouble adjusting to Brand's altered appearance; he was wearing the forehead lenses of a remembrancer, with the scalp-circuitry attached, and on each shoulder was a lightweight communicator.

He had certainly appeared only this moment, but it was obvious he had overheard—presumably via the communicators—everything that had been said prior to his arrival.

Hazel Graubart, who had been away on a private train of

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thought throughout the recent argument, was the first to react to his presence with more than a frozen stare. She jumped out of her chair and rushed at Brand, face white with rage.

"So you finally came out from behind that cowardly screen!" she blasted at him. "You finally showed yourself where I can get at you! Let me off this damned ship, hear me? Let me off this ship at once!"

She made as though to pound at Brand's chest with her fists.

He didn't seem to move, but something blurred the air before him. Suddenly giddy, Hazel dropped her arms to her sides and blinked stupidly.

"Go to your cabin, please," Brand said, his expression impassive. And again, more sharply: "To your cabin!"

Dully she turned to the door and went out, her steps heavy and dragging.

"And I'd appreciate it if the rest of you would leave me alone also," Brand continued, sweeping the room with his hard gaze. "Except you, Caversham. I want to talk to you."

Bewildered, Tanya made to protest, thought better of it—there was something tremendously disturbing about the apparition of one of the Powers of Earth in the flesh, coming directly after Caversham's shattering proposals—and led a general movement in Hazel's wake.

"I hope this implies that you're through with your illegal detention of us," Florens snapped as he went by, and Tanya gave him a look of approval as she caught his hand to urge him out.

When all the others had gone, Brand studied Caversham attentively. He had been shaken to the core to hear what the man was saying to his companions while he came aboard. It was as though the carefully-matched parts of a jigsaw had been taken up, shaken out again like dice from a cup, and



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revealed that the former tentative pattern of their arrangement was utter nonsense.

He said at last, unable to help himself, "And assuming that this very ingenious theory of yours were true, what would you suggest be done about it?"

Caversham gave a huge grin that parted his bushy beard like a knife-slash. He said, "I've never been so complimented!"

"Are you just playing with words, or have you a suggestion to make?" Brand let the words reveal impatience.

"All right," Caversham said. "I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd say to everyone aboard that they were going to be allowed to land on Earth—not at once, but say in twelve hours."

"Why?" Brand demanded. "What would it prove?"

"I see it this way. Remember, I was on Tantalus. The Tantalus is a unitary organism. It consists of millions of parts, but it only has a single central consciousness. That consciousness recognizes this delay to the *Fulmar* as a defensive act by the human race, against its probing threat. It understands threat and counter-threat. It cannot possibly be expected to match the infinite complexity of a race consisting of billions of individual identities. So far on Tantalus it has been met by less than a hundred human beings. Down on Earth there are—what?—five, ten billion. That's insurance, though. What will count is this: the Tantalus expected, and got, a counter-threat when it made its play against Earth. Withdraw the counter-threat. Let it be seen that after the most painstaking evaluation of this situation the human race finds nothing to fear from it. I'll bet the Tantalus will be so startled that it will go into a kind of anxiety neurosis and its extension here will become catatonic, because it cannot face the prospect of dealing with the—to it—inconceivably numerous individualities on Earth, which have recognized its nature and decided that it is no danger to them."

Brand was silent for a long time. At last he said, "Why do

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you suggest a twelve-hour period between the announcement and the action?"

"Isn't it obvious? You would hardly *want* to turn loose a live, functioning Tantalun unit of Earth. You'll prefer to test the response with a chance to back down if things don't pan out as intended. But this is what I think will happen: during those twelve hours the Tantalun unit aboard will go catatonic, as I say, and something very strange will be reported from Tantalus by Veliz—probably a total disruption of the creature's routine actions."

"Caversham, what's your intelligence quotient?"

"Oddly enough"—Caversham gave a crooked smile—"the same as the one generally assigned to the Tantalun: 160. But it wouldn't take a genius to work out a plan like the one I'm offering. It takes no more than somebody who hasn't resigned his power of rational deduction to a clutch of machines. I told you that before."

"Do you ever suffer from the—the typical modern nightmare? The one about machines being absolutely in control?"

Caversham shook his head. "No, but Veliz does. He admitted it once. Do you?"

"Since the *Fulmar* arrived, I've had it for the first time." The words cost Brand a great deal of effort. "Well, no matter. I believe I'm going to try out your proposal, and I hope—how I hope!—it will work as you foresee. Because myself, I'm at the limit of my resources."



XIII

IT GAVE Brand a curious inside-out feeling to be here in the interview room which he had so often seen directly via the screen at Weshemspaternor. He found himself staring at each of the sensors and scanners in turn, reminding himself of the data they had garnered, while he waited for the news from Tantalus.

Relly had gone into rigid catatonia within an hour of his announcement that the emergency would end and the passengers would be allowed to disembark; he was now lying in the ship's hospital, drugged and watched over by therapeutic apparatus. Upon Relly collapsing, he had ordered the withdrawal of the monitoring devices that formerly had reported and recorded each least event within the ship.

He had all the information he needed now, barring this one item from Tantalus, and the fact gave him a sense of inexpressible relief.

Without warning, Cornelius's voice came from the communicator, stating that Veliz was calling from Tantalus; was Brand ready to speak to him?

"Not only ready," Brand answered dryly, "impatient!"

The screen facing him lit, and Veliz appeared, the Gama-liel couple just in view behind him. There was tense excitement in each of their faces.

"Something extraordinary is happening here, Master Brand!" the project chief said shrilly. "It's as though the Tantalus has gone out of its mind!"

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Brand nodded, his expression thoughtful. "What precisely are you referring to?"

"Just about everything is disorganized." Lynette Gamaliel, cheeks flushed and eyes bright, leaned forward. "The normal smooth routine of the Tantalans' gross metabolism is falling apart—units are milling about helplessly, as though waiting for orders that don't come, and we can't get a coherent answer from any of the odor-equipped brain-cells."

"What do you get? Nonsense?"

"Pretty well nothing else," Harry Gamaliel confirmed.

"I see." Brand rubbed his chin.

"Master Brand, do you imagine there's any danger to us?" Veliz asked diffidently. "This is absolutely unprecedented. I'm assuming that it's due to something you've done at the Earthside end—if it is, can you say whether we're running the risk of an attack by the Tantalans?"

"No," Brand said. "No, I think you may be sure that in a matter of hours, or days at the longest, everything will return to normal. Thank you for your help, all of you. I believe we may now claim to have frustrated the Tantalans' best efforts against us."

He cut the circuit. The screen blanked as he rose to his feet. Turning, he slid back the door of the interview room and headed down the spinal corridor of the ship towards the passenger accommodation.

A sound of raised voices came from the bar as he passed it, and mentally he identified the speakers: Sister Dorcas was trying to persuade Florens and Waters that they should give thanks for a safe deliverance, or—as she put it in the jargon of the Circle Believers—for the safe turning of another of the infinite number of corners which together made up the Eternal Circle.

Brand's mouth twisted wryly.

He reached the cabins now, and paused before the door of each in turn, checking whether it was occupied or empty.



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He had no reason to imagine that Caversham would be in any cabin but his own, but he was thorough.

Correct. No one in the cabins of Relly, Waters, or Nia Welk/Florens, and no one in Hazel Graubart's either; she might be in the bar with the others, or alone in the observation saloon. She didn't matter. In Florens's cabin, a noise: doubtless he had told his "wife" to clear up and get his belongings ready for disembarkation. Another sound of movement from Tanya Hesit's cabin, adjacent to Caversham's.

And in Caversham's cabin: Caversham.

He was waiting for Brand, sitting on a chair facing the door, absolutely impassive. He neither moved nor spoke while Brand entered and closed the door behind him.

"It's a very strange sensation," Brand murmured, "to look at you—so precisely like a human being—and reflect that I am talking to a creature lightyears distant without the intervention of mechanical aids."

Caversham's eyes flickered, and Brand raised a warning hand.

"Don't do anything rash! Not that it would particularly concern you to die, any more than it would concern me to lose a nail-paring or a lock of hair—but you saw that I was able to fend off that hysterical attack of Hazel Graubart's, and I think you'll have gathered that I'm about as well defended as I reasonably could be. So no direct action on your part will have any effect."

He touched a chair control and lowered himself easily to a relaxed sitting posture. He was enjoying this.

"The process of deduction must be clear to you, I guess. I won't go into it—I won't insult your intelligence, which must be considerably greater than the generally accepted 160, seeing that you have several megabrain of computing capacity available at will. But I do feel I should point out that your basic protective mechanism has been nullified now."

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Caversham cocked an eyebrow in a fashion which Brand found somehow nettling.

"Did you think we'd overlook it forever?" he rasped. "It had to be worked out eventually! Whatever the nature of the telepathic emanation, there's one obvious weak spot in the structure of an extended organism with a telepathic linkage: the risk of encountering a mind with greater will-power than its own, which could convert it into a slave. This is why telepathy would ordinarily be an anti-survival factor. To have developed to such a degree on Tantalus, you must have had—you must *have*—a defensive mechanism which consists in a blanketing field, canceling out latent telepathic faculties in other creatures. I suspect that evolution has furnished you with this power in respect of land creatures on Tantalus, and other beings of similar metabolism and behavior patterns, including, to a limited extent, humans. But it hasn't succeeded where aquatic animals are concerned, since their habits are totally different. I'm sure it was the minds of the sea-beasts which prevented you spreading to the southern continent of Tantalus by yourself, perhaps by secreting aquatic modifications of your sub-units, rather than any inability to conceive a boat."

Caversham, unblinking, seemed to be staring through him. The sensation further jarred on Brand's original mood of satisfaction and achievement. In spite of his former intention, he kept talking, for fear apprehension would creep in.

"This blanketing field, now! It must be partly selective; there must be as it were gaps in the spectrum through which the linkage between your units can be maintained. Our minds are remarkably like yours—we communicated with surprisingly little difficulty when Voidech's expedition discovered you. Almost certainly, you've been able to sense certain areas of our thoughts ever since we met."

In Florens's cabin, his "wife" turned over the pillow on the



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bunk, to check whether anything belonging to him had been left there. Something brightly glistening caught her eye, and she froze, staring down at it.

"Probably you were contemptuous of us," Brand said. "It must have struck you as absurd that we should be so divided, into billions of little compartments without a telepathic union, and have to rely for the maximization of our intelligence on artificial aids. Oh, we're well aware of the drawbacks of our predicament! One of them was the one which afforded you an entry into our consciousness."

Nia closed her hand convulsively around the little shiny thing she had found in the bunk. For a long moment she hesitated; then, her face quite set, she went to one of the small cases stacked on shelves across the cabin and opened its lock.

From the case she withdrew a bolt-gun, which she checked with practiced thoroughness.

"Only after I'd listened to your pat proposal for identifying the Tantalans did it occur to me to wonder why it was you had made two facsimiles at least of the body of Vivaldi, and not tried to modify them towards a closer resemblance with someone alive: say Harry Gamaliel, or Veliz himself. When I compared the data we had on your physical makeup with the records of Vivaldi when he was alive, I was not altogether surprised. You're identical. Your body *is* that of Vivaldi, thinly disguised with a beard and long hair and a few other superficial modifications. There never was a Caversham sent from Earth to Tantalus because he showed promise in some ETP tests. You had simply *appeared*. And you had cunningly fitted yourself into a niche in the minds of those who had to deal with you: the niche carved out by such chisels as the so-called 'typical modern nightmare.' Everyone you met on

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Tantalus, especially Veliz, was too—embarrassed, almost: certainly upset—too put out by this apparition of a man who didn't mind mocking at human insecurity and reliance on machines, to stop and ask the right questions. For all I know, your telepathic blanketing field helped here also, by making otherwise intelligent people reluctant to consider an inquiry into your origins. Certainly you must have predisposed people telepathically to accept your existence."

Tanya Hesit, startled, swung to face the door of her cabin as it slid back.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Then she saw the bolt-gun, and went as pale as Nia herself.

"This is yours," Nia said very softly. She held out her hand, and showed that the bright object resting on the palm was the broken end of a chromed fingernail.

"So now we know," Brand said meditatively, "that you can read far more of our thoughts than we imagined. Tricky, that—but of course much of our thinking is forever inaccessible to you, being done by machines, and I imagine that the hunchback talent is also pretty well inaccessible. Doubtless it was these closed areas which made you proceed with such caution, such tremendous patience. . . . Well, patience anyway will come easily to an organism like yourself, not facing personal death."

He paused. "What were you aiming at, I wonder? My guess is: to domesticate us, as you've done with several rival species on your home world. But there were too many of us, to start with, an additional reason to the two I've mentioned why you should be cautious. . . . We've been thinking that we were quite insensitive to your telepathic emanations. After this episode I'm more inclined to believe that we are potentially very sensitive to them, but you preferred to maintain this blanketing influence over us rather than run the risk of



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finding that our sheer numbers overwhelmed your single centralized consciousness.”

And now, for the first time, Caversham moved and spoke. He raised his bearded head and gave a smile.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “you’re only slightly sensitive to Tantalus telepathy. Most of the time it goes through you, or perhaps around you. Like the wind. But in certain circumstances, also like the wind, it can have irresistible effects—at moments of great emotional strain, for example, when the ego is tending to disrupt altogether, it is quite effective.”

“That must have made things easy for you, then,” Brand said. “Those research workers out on Tantalus are under a permanent emotional strain, as I well know. No wonder they were ready to be persuaded of the existence of ‘Caversham!’” He sighed. “I wondered when you’d come into the open. It’s about time. . . . Shall we go?”

He made to get to his feet, but Caversham checked him with an imperious gesture. “One moment!”

Tanya’s self-control lasted mere seconds. Then she broke and tried to duck for the door. She had remembered what they said about Valhalla being a violent world; she had dismissed the idea that Nia would live up to the tradition, but the gun looked as though it was meant for business.

It was.

Nia swung it through a fast arc, and would have been able to burn Florens’s seductress to death as she went by, but that at a precisely timed moment of the gun’s sweep she pressed the fire button prematurely. The bolt missed Tanya by a yard. Following its appointed path, it seared through the cabin wall.

And also through the dangerous head of Master Brand, still in the position where Caversham had told him to remain for one more moment.

XIV

"YOU'RE CAVERSHAM, aren't you?" Cornelius said, stepping close as the passengers from the *Fulmar* made to disperse among the hustle of Weshemspaternor.

"That's right." The burly bearded man turned. "Oh, yes—you're Administrator Cornelius." He looked expectant.

"I gather you arrived at the correct explanation of what was going on by a process of unaided deduction. A considerable achievement in the circumstances."

Caversham shook his head and gave a wry grin. "I see I shall have to disabuse a lot of people of this idea that I worked some kind of miracle. The plain truth is, I haven't ceded my powers of rational thinking to some machine hired for the purpose."

"Yes . . . Well . . ." Cornelius had a sensitive spot in that area, like most modern men, and averted his eyes. "It's a shame you couldn't speak out earlier. We might have saved Master Brand from his unpleasant fate."

"Hardly," Caversham said gently. "We were all under suspicion, and whatever I'd said would have been taken as coming from the prime suspect. He told me as much himself when he came down to my cabin after Relly's collapse." Caversham wiped a trace of perspiration from his face.

"I shan't forget that in a hurry," he went on. "One moment, to see him chatting away in the most friendly fashion, thanking me for my aid—very flattering!—and the next . . ." He made a gesture like the wiping clean of a slate. "I'd have

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thought the monitoring system would have enabled you, if anybody, to save him."

Cornelius looked uncomfortable all over again. "We'd disconnected most of the monitors already," he said. "You see, I'd heard him state positively to Veliz that the Tantalum had been foiled, and with the Valhallan government and Sensi-service and everybody barking at our heels there seemed no point in another moment's delay."

"Of course not," Caversham agreed. He combed his beard with his fingers. "How about the Tantalum, anyway? Ah—*both* ends of it, I mean."

"As to Relly, we shan't be able to do anything with him until we get him back from catatonia, if then. We may have to be content with identifying the original body—if we can find it on Tantalus—because the Tantalum will doubtless withdraw the telepathic linkage now that the extension is useless. If it can, naturally."

A number of hints about the fate of Relly's "original body" were already being garnered on Tantalus, in fact. Caversham nodded. "And the Tantalum's own behavior?"

"Returning to normal, I hear—but somewhat subdued." Cornelius hesitated. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't about this that I wanted to talk to you. You know that the Powers of Earth are selected from hunchbacks who prove particularly successful; well, in view of your having been so helpful to Master Brand—"

"You still have the idea that I worked some sort of miracle!" Caversham cut in. "No, I *don't* want to be tested for hunchback ability! I want to be left to my own devices after a not very pleasant time on Tantalus and aboard the *Fulmar*."

"Yes, I quite understand," Cornelius muttered. "It was just a suggestion. Well, I'll add my thanks to Master Brand's and let you be on your way."

"We may meet again," Caversham said, and went jauntily down the ramp to begin the domestication of man.

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