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They'd left as men, but what were they now?
THE ASTRONAUTS MUST NOT LAND
John Brunner
First Book Publication

It was a time of glory and it was a time of fear. After two years, *Starventure*, the first spaceship to reach the stars beyond our solar system, was returning to Earth and all the world rejoiced. But it was to be a shallow triumph, for on the day *Starventure* landed, a huge monster appeared in the sky above southern Chile, and the terror that gripped mankind was the worst in the annals of recorded history.

Scientists were convinced that only the crew of the spaceship could unravel the mystery of the apparition. But, when the ship's latches were opened it was discovered that the astronauts had been transformed into six-limbed creatures with twisted and warped bodies—and they knew no more about their fate than the terror-stricken people on Earth.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

David Drummond

As a science-writer, he was used to explaining difficult ideas in simple terms—but now he had to explain the completely impossible!

Carmen Iglesias

Her ancestry, she held, was one-quarter Spanish, Irish, Amerind—and jaguar.

Leon Drummond

He had to struggle to remember what it felt like to have only one pair of hands.

General Suvorov

Desperation drove him to reveal the deadly secret of the starship's cargo.

Dr. Lenister

Like any good scientist, he knew that when natural laws are broken you have to scrap them and start over.

Brian Watchett

Thanks to him, the world was saved from panic by a convincing lie—which he hated.

Hermanos Iglesias

Carmen's brother . . . only he wasn't. Not any longer. He was someone—or *something*—alien.

THE ASTRONAUTS MUST NOT LAND

by

JOHN BRUNNER

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I

I WAS STILL shaking as I walked into Chambord's office a good ten minutes afterwards. Ramona, the pretty local girl who served as barrier between Chambord and the outside world, put her hand up to her open mouth as I went past her. Her eyes enormously wide, she said, "*Madre de Dios!*" Then she crossed herself rapidly. I looked as though I'd seen a ghost.

As far as I could tell, I *had* seen a ghost.

Chambord glanced up from his desk when I opened his door without knocking. Behind him on the wall he had a giant blowup of the Andromeda Nebula—one of the famous series taken at the Lunar Observatory—so sited that when he sat upright it framed his head like a halo. I think he had fixed it that way on purpose.

He was so proud of the fact that he recognised me after two years that he got right through his first sentence before he noticed the ghastly expression I was wearing. He said, "If anyone had asked me to bet who would be first in here when it was time, I'd have said, 'David Drummond, of course'. And . . . and in the name of the good God, David, what is wrong?"

I let myself fall into the visitor's chair and took my dark glasses off so I could wipe my sweating face. The sweat was not from heat; Quito is on the equator, but it's nine thousand feet up. I could feel my heart hammering my ribs fit to break them apart.

I said, "Henri, I just saw my brother. I saw Leon—right here in Quito!"

Chambord stared at me. Being French-born, he was too polite to tell me in so many words that I was insane, but he had a tough job.

"Calm yourself, David!" he instructed solicitously. "A glass of water? A cigarette? You are all worked up."

"You're goddamn right," I said harshly. I leaned on the edge of the desk and repeated my first statement, slowly and clearly. "I just saw my brother Leon, here in Quito!"

"It must have been someone else, David."

I said, "Hell! My own *brother!* I saw him right there on the Calle Gagarin, no more than ten minutes back!"

"At a distance, perhaps. You may have been thinking about your brother, and fancied a resemblance."

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. My heart went back obediently to something nearer normal tempo. I said, "Have you any brothers, yourself?"

"Ah . . . yes, I have two brothers."

"Do you think you could mistake someone else for your brother if you were no farther from him than the width of the Calle Gagarin?"

"My brothers are in France; I have not seen them for many years. So—"

"It's only two years since I saw Leon," I snapped. "We grew up in one another's pockets. I'm saying it isn't possible for me to be mistaken."

But by this time I was having trouble convincing myself. Chambord sensed this, and produced his ace of trumps.

"It is more than possible," he said. "It's certain. For your brother is aboard *Starventure,* and *Starventure* is crossing the orbit of Jupiter."

At that point my reflexes took over. I forgot the ridiculous idea that I'd seen Leon in Quito. I'd known all along it was impossible. My mind jerked back to what Chambord had said when I came in: "Who would be first here when it was time?"

I had my crystal recorder—flat, the size of two packs of

cigarettes—out of my pocket on the instant. I said, "Since when? How long ago did they pick up her signal?"

"Only a little over an hour ago. I was working on the press release as you came in."

"Give me the bare facts. I'll be back for more later."

He smiled, plainly relieved to see me acting more like my normal self, and held out an official UN teletype form. I'd learned to read space-code in the cradle, more or less. One glance was enough.

Starventure returned to normal space; fifteen degrees above the plane of the ecliptic; direction of sublight travel normal to Alpha Centauri; signals coming in strong and clear; crew well; mission successful.

"The biggest story since Columbus," I said, handing back the form and getting to my feet. "And I'm ahead of the crowd. I hadn't the slightest intention of calling here until I saw Leon—*thought* I saw," I corrected myself as I noticed a disapproving curl of Chambord's lip. "Maybe I should have myself tested for psi ability. When do they expect to make actual contact?"

"I haven't heard yet," Chambord said. "It all depends, of course, on the resultant speed with which she re-entered normal space. Assuming it's of the order of thousands of miles a second, enough to bring her into orbit around Earth under her own power, then—forty hours. If they have to send tugs out to her, somewhat longer."

"Fine! I'll be back."

I went out in such a hurry I slammed the door, and the green United Nations shield on the outer side almost fell off its peg with the bang. Ramona jerked on her chair and glanced around, preparing to cross herself again; I gave her the most reassuring grin I could manage and headed for the pay-phone booths in the foyer.

I was probably the first man to profit directly from the launching of *Starventure*. At that time—two years before—I'd had a science-news column syndicated in about thirty countries through Solar Press and its associated agencies. It was pure luck that owing to my inside position and having

Leon for a brother I made a fortune out of my coverage of the launching, or at least enough to turn freelance and concentrate on books instead of a grinding weekly schedule.

I remembered, as I waited in the phone booth for my call to Solar Press's New York office to go through, how Hank Sandler had received the news that I'd decided to leave his staff. I told him he ought to be glad to see me go, because he was always complaining that my phone credit-card was the most expensive the agency had ever guaranteed, being good for sound and vision A1 priority calls from any place on Earth to New York. (Once I'd tried to get them to extend it to Luna, but with tight-beam satellite relay calls running at twenty bucks a second, they refused.)

I put the card in front of him, expecting him to try and talk me out of my decision. He did no such thing—just picked up the card and handed it back and said, "Compliments of Solar Press."

I'd never used it since, but I'd never gone anywhere without it. *Now* I was using it.

The face of one of the New York staff went up on the screen, gray-white and black: Jimmy Weston, that was the name. He said, "Thank goodness we reached you, Mr. Drummond. Mr. Sandler's been going half crazy."

I blinked. I said, "You didn't reach me. What do you mean?"

"Aren't you in Venezuela? We're paging you there."

"Haven't been there since yesterday afternoon. Look, whatever it is it can wait. Give me the copy desk—I have a clear beat, but it'll only last a few minutes."

"I . . . I guess I'd better put you through to Mr. Sandler."

And before I could say any more, he did. Sandler's face came up on the screen just as he was breathing out a huge cloud of cigar smoke, and it hung frozen around his head until the next picture-melt was due.

I said, "Hank, it's great to see you, but I didn't call for a social chat. I've been trying to tell Jimmy Weston I have a beat. *Starventure* is back!"

His voice was absolutely level as he answered. "Maybe that accounts for it."

I was completely taken aback.

"Accounts for what?" I said foolishly, and then recovered myself. "No, don't waste time answering that! Will you get me put through to the copy desk now?"

"What have you got?" I heard the rustle of paper; then the picture-melt caught him with an open pad of paper and a stylo.

I told him baldly, heard his message-tube click and knew that the information was safely on the way to the telefaxes. Stage one was over. The second stage would be to write the real story, but I'd been writing it in my head ever since the launching, and it would come out automatically.

"Thanks, David," Sandler said after a pause. "It's the biggest. How far ahead of the competition are you?"

"Not much more than minutes, I guess. Henri Chambord is too strict for that. But it so happened that I came in to the UN press office here in Quito because I—"

I hesitated. Should I say, "I saw my brother"? Or, "I *thought* I saw my brother"?

I backed down. Half of me was still sure that was Leon I had seen large as life in the bright noon sunlight. Half of me was perfectly aware that he was out near Jupiter's orbit.

"Well, the reason doesn't matter," I concluded. "It so happened I called just as Henri was drafting the press release. How come you were trying to contact me, by the way? Have you turned psychic?"

"Not exactly." Sandler sounded puzzled. "David, have you heard anything about the appearance of a monster in the sky over Southern Chile? Panic in a fishing-village down there?"

"Was that what you wanted me about? I'm afraid mass hallucination isn't in my line."

"That's just it, David. This doesn't . . . doesn't *smell* like a silly-season story."

I didn't say anything. Hank Sandler might not know a nucleotron from an ergolyser, but news he did know, with an almost supernatural instinct for what mattered.

He went on, "Since you happened to be in Latin America, I thought of asking you to check on it. Still, forget it now."

I said, "Did you think there might be a connection between this and the return of *Starventure*?"

"That was off the top of the head, and on reflection it obviously won't hold water. *Starventure* got back not much more than an hour ago, and this thing happened last night. If you're interested, though, I'll 'fax you the story care of the UN press office. I'll put in one or two other puzzling items as well, which have the same feel about them."

Another picture shift caught him leaning back with a lugubrious expression, which didn't match his warm voice as he concluded, "Well, that's irrelevant. What I ought to be saying is thanks for remembering Solar, I guess. But I don't have enough words."

"Save 'em," I said. "I have plenty. Get me the copy desk and I'll write your main release over the phone."

The picture wiped, and a sign came on saying, "Please start speaking at the third tone." I closed my eyes. I didn't have to fumble. I knew how it was going to be, and it was good.

I said, "A dream as old as civilization has come true. Man has thrown down his challenge to the stars. . . ."

II

I WAS STILL talking when the door of the wire-room across the foyer opened and a messenger headed towards Chambord's office. He came back at a dead run, shouting and waving a sheet of paper. In the sound-proof booth I couldn't hear what he was saying, and my Spanish, though reliable, was slow anyway. But I didn't have to be told that inside half an hour probably every reporter in Quito from the agency men to the frowsiest legman off the locals would be cramming themselves in here the way they used to two years ago.

Two years ago . . .

I finished my story. Sandler came back on to say that the bundle of material he had promised was on the 'faxes, and to thank me again. I decided I might as well hang around for what he was sending me, since it interested him so much, so I came out of the booth and sat down on one of the comfortable padded benches around the walls of the foyer to smoke a thoughtful cigarette. And to worry again at the mistake that had brought me in here.

Damn it, in two years I couldn't not know my own brother—not in bright sunlight from one side of the street to the other. Yet all logic said I had done just that. I'd seen Leon go aboard the ferry with my own eyes, and that ferry had gone out to *Starventure*, orbiting at three thousand miles, and had snicked into the after-hold—because it was going to serve as one of the landing-boats if Alpha Centauri turned out to have planets men could walk on.

Then the tugs had dragged the starship's vast hull out of orbit. I'd seen that too—all of Earth had, on the planet-wide TV linkup covering the departure. Beyond Mars's orbit and slanting Centaurusward, the tugs had dropped off. Captain Rukeyser had called a nervous-sounding good-bye, and all the news commentators the following day had said how his nervousness was a wonderful reminder that after all it was ordinary men who were going to the stars.

And they went.

Where? How? Even to me—and I've spent my working life making science and technology comprehensible to the man in the street—it was a hell of a job putting the thinking behind that stardrive into everyday language. Liu Chen, who developed it, spoke nothing but his native Mandarin, and expounded his theories in symbology so abstruse that more than one doctorate was awarded for theses clarifying it. I was once told by a linguistics expert I interviewed that Liu Chen's nationality probably had a great deal to do with this difficulty; Chinese thinking, even after a century of writing with letters, was heavily conditioned by the structure of the Chinese language, he told me.

As simply as possible, though: Liu Chen developed a sys-

tem for identifying individual particles by describing their relationship to other particles. He began with atoms, and in the general theory—which took him another ten years—extended his system to photons, mesons, the whole gamut down to and including neutrinos. Then he came most of the way back again and produced statistical tools for handling the local relationship between substantial numbers of particles. He got a Nobel prize and a United Nations award and a lifetime pension from the Chinese government and retired to write a commentary on the book *I Ching* and yarrow-stalk divination.

Then a Chukchi Eskimo studying theoretical physics in Ljubljana and a Mexican at Columbia independently saw what Liu Chen had overlooked: that one of the characteristics he had proposed for identifying individual particles could be isolated from the rest, since it depended on the location of other particles so distant that they were effectively at infinity, and if this characteristic were real then it could be changed by the application of certain local stresses in the continuum.

On that fragile foundation they built a robot ship which crossed the solar system at four times the speed of light. And next they built *Starventure.*

When Rukeyser hit the stardrive control, every atom of the ship and its crew, plus the associated energy, shifted into a different state of being. The ship's "proper" location, so to speak, became somewhere in the vicnity of Alpha Centauri, and there it went, simply because it "wanted" to belong to our ordinary universe again and until it was in the right place it couldn't.

It was clearer in mathematical symbols. The same linguist who told me about Liu Chen's Chinese thought-patterns also said that he expected it would take a century before we could describe the operation of a stardrive in words. But, he went on, we'd use words that we had used before; we'd simply understand different conceptual referents by them.

I asked him to give me an example, and he suggested, "Take the word 'engine'. Originally that meant the same as

'contrivance'. Now it's taken over the meaning of 'motor', and extended it."

But when I put it in my weekly column, almost a hundred people wrote in to say they didn't believe it.

I was *sure* I'd seen Leon!

It wasn't as though we were brothers the way Henri Chambord and his brothers were—Henri working for the UN's press department, getting home maybe once in two or three years for a vacation, the others staying in Paris or wherever. Leon and I were six years apart in age, but we'd always been close. Since my father disappeared when I was twelve, and my mother died when I was nineteen, I had to be as much a parent as a brother.

I was studying physics and chemistry, but when Mom died I quit and went to work on a small-town paper, where I found that enough of what I'd learned in the lab had stuck for me to become a science-writer, which I did. In the end I worked up to a Kalinga Prize and the top post in the business, on roving assignment for Solar Press, and ultimately was able to settle to a comfortable living from two or three popular scientific books a year.

Possibly it was hero worship that persuaded Leon to take up the physical sciences, or maybe it was my hangover of bitterness at having had to forgo a career in research that gave him a yen to carry on past where I'd had to leave off. However that might be, he had the gift. His was one of the doctorates awarded on theses concerned with Liu Chen's theory, as it happened; then he applied for, and got, a job with the team designing *Starventure*'s drive, and eventually they picked him as crew.

They only allowed the crew's immediate dependents to see them board the ferry before departure; the crew numbered sixty, so it was a crowd anyway. I was Leon's one close relative, of course, and I was proud as hell. About the only thing I was prouder of was the story I wrote afterwards. Just about everyone present sold their first-person impressions to some agency, to be ghosted for publication, but I was a reporter, and I was there, and the fact showed, and people

knew. I made a small fortune, left Quito, and set out to enjoy myself.

Now, back in the foyer of the UN press office, I could close my eyes and recapture the exact scene on that epochal day two years ago. I could see Rukeyser, I could see Chandra Dan, I could see Hobart and Efremov and all the others who were just faces to me. I could see Leon.

Alongside that recollection I could put the memory of the man I'd seen this very day, and make a point-for-point match right down to the expression.

What were the odds against that? I did some inaccurate mental calculations involving the total population figure and the per-generation mixing of the genetic pool, and came up with something around ten to the seventh power. Multiply by the number of cities on Earth—because this had happened in Quito and nowhere else—and it became altogether ridiculous.

More rationally, I could think that my mind had played me a trick. But why this particular trick, which brought me the piece of luck I wanted more than anything else? I'd joked to Chambord about being tested for psi ability, but I had little patience for ESP enthusiasts.

Coincidence. A result of returning to Quito. They picked Quito as the spatial capital of Earth for good reasons, of course: on the equator, near as damn it; over nine thousand feet above sea-level, so that much less air to contend with (though this also meant that they had to slide some small mountains into adjacent valleys to create the actual port); and not least important, because it was the capital of a country small enough not to make the conceited big countries jealous of their national honor. Everyone could feel patronizing and patting-on-head, barring some other Latin American countries, and no one listened to their complaints, so they gave up.

I'd got to know it pretty well two years ago. It hadn't changed that I'd noticed on the two or three occasions I'd been back since. But if *Starventure*'s mission had been *really* successful, there would be other trips, and other ships, and this city would change.

The door of the wire-room opened again. There was still a sound of jubilation from inside, and I distinctly heard the clink of bottles mixed up with the purring hum of teletypes and facsimile receivers. A girl came out with a thick sheaf of the light-brown-sensitive paper they use on the 'faxes.

"Señor Drummond?" she said, coming up to me.

I thanked her and began to sort through what Sandler had sent. There was a hell of a lot of it. He must be taking his hunch seriously. Included were not only Solar Press stories, but releases from other agencies and even clips from papers which had been cut out and put direct in the transmitter, for I could see the shadowed edges where the clipper's scissors had gone off a straight line.

Now what crazy intuition had led Hank Sandler to tie this lot up in the same bundle?

The first two were accounts of the phenomenon he'd mentioned on the phone—the panic-stricken inhabitants of a Chilean coastal village reported seeing a vast gape-jawed animal face luminous in the sky. I thought at first glance they were duplicates, and was going past the second one when a name struck me. I checked back. No, they weren't duplicates. One was from a village called Mochasia, the other from one called San Felipe. They agreed on all essential points, but they'd come in through different agencies.

The next item concerned an extraordinary display of the Northern Lights. Well, there was Sandler's explanation, I thought. Auroral phenomena over the South Pole as well, which must have taken on the appearance of an animal face by chance. It was curious that accounts from different places agreed so precisely, but no more than curious.

Violent electrical storms. That tied in too. So did references to the blanking out of radio transmission over the central and southern Pacific. So did reports of peculiar magnetic anomalies from widely separated observatories.

I leafed through the rest and sat frowning at the top ones again. True, these were pointers to an interesting story, but not one which ought to have startled Sandler into paging me all over Venezuela. At most, this was going to supply a line of inquiry to fill the dead period between now, when

the *Starventure* story was breaking, and the day after tomorrow when we could expect the first direct reports of the Centaurus trip. Side effects of the ship's return to normal space, possibly; maybe energies analgous to Cherenkov radiation preceding the emergence. I could ask around.

But not right now. I caught sight of the wall-clock and realised I was going to be late for my lunch appointment, and this I refused to do, starships notwithstanding. Pocketing the bundle of papers, I made for the door, and was almost knocked off my feet by the first of the rush of newsmen coming in answer to Chambord's press release.

I reflected on the nature of luck as I headed for the restaurant.

III

I ALMOST GOT married once, but we changed our minds, and I thought afterwards it was just as well. What with Leon and family troubles, I put in a good deal of kid-minding early in life, and never felt much that way inclined again. My old man's example didn't equip me as a satisfactory father, and on top of that my roving job made the idea seem pretty silly anyway.

But I'd met quite a few women who liked me on those terms, and the second thing I'd done on arriving in Quito was to call Carmen. The first was to fix an appointment with the man I'd actually come to see; I was considering a chapter on recent developments in solar studies for my next book, and one of the finest solar observatories on Earth was a few miles from Quito. I wouldn't have made the trip specially to see Carmen, but now that I was going to see her I was, as usual, wondering why not.

One member of the *Starventure*'s crew was Ecuadorian: a

geologist-geophysicist called Hermanos Iglesias. He had two grandparents living, both parents, four uncles with wives and children, two aunts with husbands and one without, two brothers married with children, four sisters married with children and one married without children and one not married. They all came down to the ferry under the "close relatives" clause, bubbling with happiness and boasting to everyone who would listen about their marvelous boy Hermanos who had won scholarships all through from first grade to university and was now going to the stars. Intermittently they invoked St. Christopher.

Carmen was the unmarried sister. She was small, not at all pretty, with a sharp nose, a wry mouth, skin very faintly tinged with yellow and hair as black as space. She managed to get separated from the rest of the family in the crowd at the farewell ceremony, and I managed to catch up with her again when the ferry lifted for long enough to make a date. I never figured out why she said yes, but I never regretted it. I told her later that her ancestry was one quarter each Spanish, Irish, Amerind and puma, and she answered, "No, not puma. I think jaguar."

So that was always the second matter I had to attend to when something brought me to Ecuador. Sometimes I wished I came more often, and other times I told myself I ought to stay away for five years. However, a total stay of about a month and a half in two years wasn't exactly monopolizing her company.

She was in the bar of the restaurant when I got there, drinking iced passionfruit juice, and on the faces of the men present was the inevitable puzzled look, as though they were wondering why they went on looking at this girl who obviously wasn't at all attractive.

Of course, the first thing I said after greeting her was, "Have you heard?"

She raised one very black eyebrow, her forehead wrinkling into parallel ridges, and signalled the waiter to bring a drink for me.

"*Starventure* is back!" I said.

She took the news as calmly as though I'd said, "The sun is out today." She sipped at her drink before answering.

"So that explains it," she said.

I had a momentary sense of dislocation; this was so like Hank Sandler's reaction to the news. "Explains what?"

"My thinking I saw Hermanos this morning."

I was just picking up the drink the waiter had brought me. The shock of her remark made me jump as though I'd been stabbed. Liquor splashed on the back of my hand. I said, "You saw your brother? Where? When?

She made a casual gesture. "Oh, I imagined that I saw him from my window this morning. I knew it was only a vision, of course, and the fact that the ship is coming back would account for it. There has often been second sight in my family—my grandmother says it came from Ireland—and after all I'm the seventh child of a seventh child."

Still as calm as could be, she sipped her drink again.

I took a deep breath. I said, "I haven't any Irish in me, and I never heard that any of my Scots forebears were fey. I'm not even a seventh child; we haven't had such big families for generations. But I saw Leon today."

"You also?"

"You saw Leon as *well* as Hermanos?"

"No, no, no!" she laughed. "I mean, you had a vision of your brother as I did of mine. How strange!"

"Strange!" I said, and swallowed my drink in one go in case she had any more shocks waiting for me. "I was so convinced it was really Leon I went straight to the UN press office all set to accuse Henri Chambord of conspiring to mislead the public."

"How, mislead?"

"Why, I'd seen Leon here with my own eyes, which meant either that *Starventure* had already returned and the fact was being kept secret, or that she had never gone anywhere in the first place and the story was a vast hoax." I hesitated. "Of course," I added, "when I heard the news from Henri I realised I'd been mistaken."

"But you still don't really believe that," she said quietly. "My vision also was very real. Are you hungry, David, or

shall we find out whether anyone else with relatives aboard the ship has seen them today?"

That was another, negative shock—that she could conceive such a ridiculous notion and be ready to act on it. I said, "The hell with it. Yes, I am hungry. And I haven't seen you for a long time and I want to know what's news. And I have to go and interview a professor this afternoon, and my old boss has sent me a curious collection of silly-season stories to look into." I half-drew the sheaf of 'faxed material from my pocket.

"Very well." She gathered her gloves and purse and stood up. "Shall we go in?"

We went into the restaurant and were shown to our table. I'd never been here before; Carmen had suggested meeting here when I called her. It was plushy and gilded, and there was a band, which always irritates me, but the food was excellent.

"You asked me what is news," Carmen said. "You know I have still the old job, since you called me at the office yesterday. But I have my own apartment now. I would have told you on the phone, but each time you are away I think maybe you will change, so I preferred to see you face to face before mentioning it. But you do not change."

She wrinkled her nose amusingly. "You will have dinner with me there tonight? This is to cause scandal, of course, if my family learns of it. And will you be here long enough to call on them?"

I had to smile. "You don't change either," I said. "You remain exactly as astonishing as you always were."

"You," she retorted, "are not astonishing at all. Always you come here for some excellent reason—an interview, a visit to some laboratory—and always you talk about it first and me second. That's one reason I like you. Most men talk about themselves first, and go right on talking."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't like men," I said. The memory of how much better I did know startled me as I spoke, and I found myself wondering how I ever managed to stay away from Quito when Carmen was here.

I decided to change the subject.

"As to how long I'm staying, now *Starventure* is back I can't say. I'd intended a few days at most. But I promised Hank Sandler long ago that I'd cover the return of the ship for Solar Press, and even if they hadn't contracted to pay ten thousand a week for the whole period of quarantine, landing, de-briefing and so on, I'd still stay here. After all, there's my brother out there. Who can say how long it will take? It's the first time, after all."

It still had power to make my voice shake a little, fill my guts with a chill of awe. *The first starship is back!* I repeated the words to myself under my breath. Then I said aloud, "Carmen, doesn't it *do* anything to you, thinking how tremendous it is? More than eight lightyears there and back—men circling under a different sun? Doesn't it?"

She fixed me squarely with the pools of midnight she had for eyes. She said in a level voice, "I saw Hermanos this morning, David. I have never experienced second sight before. Nor have you. I believe in it. You don't. I'm . . . worried."

I drove her back to her office after arranging to arrive for dinner at seven-thirty in her new apartment, and later rather than earlier, she said, if I didn't want to interrupt her cooking. I wished very much there was something I could tell her as I left her, to ease her troubled mind. But I had no ideas.

Before going out to the solar observatory I called Chambord and learned that there was nothing to add to what I'd filed earlier, except that they were computing the orbits for the tugs and their crews were already on standby. I asked about human interest on the members of those crews, and was told that there would be names and biographies going out on the wire by evening, but that until *Starventure* was safely in orbit around Mother Earth space-radio traffic was going to be too heavy for frilly bits like personal interviews with tug pilots.

Fair enough. I returned to my car and took the road leading to the observatory, the opposite direction from that for

the spaceport. I was already a fair distance along before it occurred to me to wonder what the hell I was doing, anyway. Part of my mind had got stuck in yesterday, as far as I could tell. The book I'd been considering wasn't going to get written until the furor over the starflight had died down, so what was the hurry?

Contrariwise, what was the point of wasting a perfectly good appointment with a rather distinguished scientist when by tomorrow there would be reporters waiting on line outside every laboratory and observatory on Earth? I trod hard on the gas, letting the wind of my passage blow away the questions I had been going to ask, and substituting some more topical ones.

I didn't think these were going to be so easy to answer.

IV

Professor Rodrigo Acosta received me in his plain, workmanlike office, where the decorations consisted of a blowup of a satellite picture showing a Pacific typhoon brewing—so perfect it looked like an artist's impression rather than the real thing—and a magnificent full-colour photograph of the solar corona during an eclipse.

He was a little, dry man in shirtsleeves, who wore gold-rimmed glasses and was going bald. He spoke very good English, which didn't surprise me—he had worked at Flagstaff and Greenwich.

"I have been trying to reach you, as a matter of fact," he began when I was seated. "Since the news of this morning, I am being plagued with reporters, and I had intended to cancel this appointment. But for you . . . and a few of your colleagues, a little while at least."

He took his glasses off very rapidly, grinned and blinked

at me, and put them on again. I thanked him sincerely; I'd trade a hundred compliments from laymen for one from a working research scientist like Acosta.

"And now," he went on, rubbing his hands, "what is it about? You had intended simply to look over our latest data, you said, but after the news of the starship, I imagine you want comments of some kind."

I said, stabbing in the dark after a suspicion which had come to me in the car on the way here, "You have some unexplained solar phenomena, don't you?"

"Yes . . . yes, there are some peculiar fluctuations in the corona, for instance. And some anomalies in the sun's magnetic field."

"Due to the emergence of the starship into normal space?" I had my crystal recorder out and on my knee; Acosta was frowning at it, but he probably couldn't think of a polite reason to object to a recording.

He said reluctantly, "It's far too early to do more than make guesses, you understand. But . . . well, while we can't rule out coincidence, we have to allow the possibility. After all, this is the first time such a massive body has returned to normal space after so long a trip."

"Has anyone ever envisaged the possibility of stray energies analogous to Cherenkov radiation preceding a body driven faster than light?"

"It has been suggested," Acosta agreed. "Until now, of course, it's been hypothetical. But . . . something of the sort might account for the disturbances we've noted."

"Could it also account for events such as these?" I suggested, taking out and handing him the material Sandler had 'faxed to me. He thumbed through the pile hastily. While he was so occupied, I ran over my half-formulated idea.

Cherenkov radiation: the result of passing particles at extremely high speed through a substance in which these particles were effectively exceeding the speed of light. Compare it to ripples on water produced by the passage of a ship, some of which are running ahead of the vessel itself. If you were to drive a starship through empty space faster

than light—said theory—it could not be reacting with objects in real space; it would be in a different order of existence. But when slowing down, when crossing that indefinable threshold between its two possible states of being, maybe then—

Acosta was handing back my papers. He said, "I am too much of a specialist to comment on these reports, Mr. Drummond. It is far too soon to make up the mind. Did you associate these events, by the way?"

I shook my head. "They were sent to me by the New York agency I used to work for. My old chief has an almost supernatural talent for tying together items which to other people don't seem to be connected. But for the fact that he drew my attention to these matters, I'd never have asked you about them."

A phone buzzed on his desk, and he excused himself with a mutter. When he pressed the come-in switch, the shrill, excited voice of one of his assistants was heard, saying something about flares; he listened for a moment and then cut in with a curt, *"Pronto!"*

Rising to his feet, and unable to conceal his eagerness, he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Drummond, but I'm urgently required to return to work. You will forgive me, I'm sure."

I also stood up. Angling for a chance to accompany him to see what had so excited the assistant, I said, "Some more new developments? Anomalous solar flares?"

He didn't rise to the implications, but merely nodded and put out his hand. There was nothing else I could do but shake it and take my leave.

All the way back to Quito my head was buzzing. If stray energies running ahead of *Starventure* were in fact responsible for this miscellaneous collection of news items Sandler had sent me, and for the peculiar behaviour of the sun which was so exciting Acosta, then presumably some sort of flare would have accompanied the actual emergence into normal space. It would probably be too much to hope that some observatory, either on Earth or in space, would have captured the minute speck of light—though this was conceivable—but

there might very well have been a brief burst of cosmic rays which could be identified and attributed to this event. In which case it was going to be dangerous to point future starships directly at Earth and perhaps even at the sun; what the effect would be if a sizeable neutrino flux struck the sun I could only guess, but the idea made me uncomfortable. And there would certainly be neutrinos if there was any radiation at all.

I spent a long time wondering whether to let Sandler have the idea while it was still an idea. In the end I decided not to. Logic compelled me to agree with Acosta—it was too soon to make up one's mind about these strange events.

It would have been fine if I could have made some inquiries of people closely connected with the starship project itself. In a day or two I might in fact be able to—I'd met most of the top scientists at the port when I was here for the launching—but today I wouldn't have the face to bother them.

I was five minutes late at Carmen's for the sake of appearances, and that was exactly right. Carmen was exactly right, too—she was wearing crimson, a colour I detest on women who can't carry it off like her. I admired her, I admired her new apartment, I admired her cooking and choice of wines. It was all set to be a hell of a fine evening. She seemed to have forgotten the unease she had felt earlier about her vision of Hermanos.

We were just finishing off with coffee and a fiery local cognac, and thinking about turning down the lights and playing some music, when there was a sound of shouting from the street outside. At first we ignored it. Then it grew—grew like a rising tide. When it was loud, we stopped talking and listened. When it was like a whole city crying out, we stared at each other and decided simultaneously to go out on the balcony.

The instant we opened the windows, we saw the light it was shedding—unearthly blue-green light, somehow sickly. We looked out, looked up. I felt Carmen's hand close suddenly and painfully on my wrist.

It was a monster in the sky.

I had been staring at it in total disbelief for a good half-minute before I thought of recording it. I managed to break Carmen's grip on my wrist; she was just frozen, gazing upward with her mouth a little open and her eyes as wide as they would go. I got the recorder out of my pocket, turned the master switch from voice to vision recording, and began to scan. My hand was shaking so badly I wasn't sure it was worth the trouble; anyway, the damned thing filled so much of the sky I could barely get it all in even with the lens at its widest setting.

Maybe the thing those Chilean fisherfolk had seen over them was an auroral phenomenon. *This* wasn't.

We were on the top floor of an eight-storey block. Opposite, across a wide avenue, was another block similar except that it had three more storeys and a huge lush roof-garden with tall palms growing. Behind the trees was the monster's body. Its legs would be below the horizon, if it had legs. Sprawling up from there came hideously ridged folds of sickly blue, like the phosphorescence of putrid fish. A mouth opened greeny-black forty-five degrees above the horizon, and seemed cavernous enough to gulp down our petty planet in a single devouring swallow. Within the mouth things writhed and dripped. And on either side of that tremendous opening were eyes.

I say eyes, not knowing what else to call them. They were like blobs of blue-green quicksilver running around in black orbital pits, movement of colored light over their surface giving the impression that they were round and rolling on a curved surface. They rolled in perfect unison, and it was this fact which suggested they might be eyes. If one of the blobs switched to the upper half of its black pit, so did the other; then they dropped again, together.

Even through the viewfinder of the recorder, I felt that the monstrous animal was looking Earth over as though to decide where first to sink its teeth.

And then it began to fade.

The shouting and screaming in the city faded with it, and I realized for the first time that there were people on other balconies all along the street, and in the roof-garden across

the way from us, staring up at the sky and uttering groaning prayers. Traffic in the roadway, as far as I could see in both directions, had stopped. People were clambering on the roofs of cars for a better view.

I kept on recording till the last smear of blue-green was gone, and the sane, familiar stars which the monster had obscured shone reassuringly down. Then I lowered the recorder and found that I had cramp from trying to hold it still. I was also, for the first time in my life, literally soaked with sweat. I'd been clammy from heat or tension, but now I could hardly have been wetter if I'd walked an hour in falling rain.

I moved my arm up and down, feeling the agony of cramp yield to the agony of returning circulation. Sure that Carmen would have retained her self-possession even in face of what had just happened, I contrived to make my first remark sound flippant. I said, "Talk about signs and portents!"

She turned blindly to me, threw her arms around me, and burst into tears. As I'd told her, she was always astonishing.

After I'd soothed her for a minute or so, she recovered and drew away from me. "I'm sorry," she said, stroking away tears from each eye with swift dabbing gestures. "But . . . David, I did not tell you the whole truth when we had lunch. I am more than worried. I am frightened, and that . . . what we saw . . . broke me down."

"It would break anybody," I said. "What in hell do you imagine it was?"

Giving another frightened glance at the sky—it was still clear and starry and normal—she fumbled a cigarette from a box. I had to light it for her, her hands were trembling so.

"I . . . I thought, you see," she went on, "when I saw Hermanos this morning, that it was what I have always been told: that I have the power my grandmother talks about." She sounded more like herself now; I relaxed.

"But you proved to have had a vision too, and now it seems all the people in Quito too! It must have been a vision, no? It couldn't have been real!"

I shrugged, feeling my sweat-damp shirt move stickily on my back.

"What can it mean?" she cried suddenly. "What can it mean?"

"I don't know. But we can find out whether it was a mass hallucination or whether there was something actually there." I hefted my recorder in my hand and went across to the phone on the other side of the room. I wasn't sure whether the phones in Quito had recorder-playback attachments, when I came to think about it, but as it turned out this was an up-to-date model with full accessory equipment. I clipped the recorder to the vision strand of the cable and lifted off the receiver. Giving it a moment to warm up, I set the recorder to replay.

In the half-second that followed, I hoped desperately that it *had* been a mass hallucination, and that the screen would show I had recorded only the buildings and the sky. But I had the monster—mouth, eyes and all. Three full minutes of it had gone down on the crystals.

I looked around at Carmen. She was staring at the now blank screen as she had stared at the thing in the sky. Alarmed, I spoke her name.

She gave a forced laugh and reached to drop the forgotten ash of her cigarette in an ashtray. She said, "I'm all right. But *does* this mean the thing was real?"

Well, it was at least half-true. I said stoutly, "It most certainly does not. It only means that we were seeing a pattern of light in the sky, rather than imagining it. But as to the thing being solid and substantial, why, that's out of the question."

"Just as impossible as it was for me to see Hermanos today, or you to see your brother?" Carmen spoke in a tone I remembered; I knew better than to contradict, so I just put on a sceptical expression. It didn't last.

There was a pause. At length she said, "David, do you think many people would have had the presence of mind to take pictures?"

"Probably," I said, though I rather thought not. The thing could only have lasted six or seven minutes altogether, and I'd practically forgotten to record it myself.

"But it would be worth it for you to send them to your

agency?" Receiving my nod, she went on, "Then please send the pictures, why don't you?"

I hesitated. "It will be very expensive on your phone bill if I do it from here," I said finally. "Shall I go find a pay phone where I can use my credit-card?"

"No!" she said with sudden violence, and then got to her feet and came over to me, laying one small hand on mine as though to reassure herself of my reality. "No, David. You must not leave me—not for a minute. Tonight I am too afraid to be alone."

V

THREE OR FOUR times that night she cried out in her sleep, woke herself up far enough to feel my arms around her, and as it were drew them tight like armor on her smooth supple body. My sleep was shallow, too, and stained with nightmare.

Not long after it was light, a little after six, we woke finally. We lay together for a while in silence, wondering if the monster in the sky had also been merely a nightmare. Then, as if she could read my thoughts from the touch of my hand, she stirred and turned her head to look at me, and said, "You will tell me what you learn, won't you, David?"

I wanted to stay, but I needed to leave and re-establish contact with the world. She had known that. So I made the promise, and went into the clear warm morning.

It had not been nightmare. There were screaming headlines on the early newspaper bills. There were the citizens who had spent the night in churches and cathedrals, praying; now they were coming out, hundreds at a time, looking nervously skyward after every step as they went to buy papers or hear radio news bulletins in bars and cafés, wishing to disbelieve their own memories and finding it impossible.

I kept thinking of the supposed aurora the Chilean fisherfolk had seen in their sky.

I found myself a cab whose driver was scared, and made me scared too because he was driving with his eyes more on the sky than on the road. Most other drivers seemed to be doing the same; St. Christopher, whose medal hung on the dashboard, must have been working overtime. The man asked me one question as I got into his cab: "Did you see it?"

I said yes.

"So did I," he said, and fell moodily silent until we reached my hotel.

It was too early for the morning's mail, and anyway I wasn't expecting anything—the last address I'd had a chance to give anyone was in Venezuela. But there was a message for me at the reception desk in the lobby; would I call such-and-such a number, which had been trying to get me all yesterday evening?

I had breakfast in the company of newspapers and the material Sandler had sent me, wondering if there was another link here or not. Then I called the Quito office of America News Service, which was Solar Press's associate in most countries south of Mexico. I was in luck; my old and good friend Manuel Segura was there, and after a few moments wasted saying how were we after all this time and we must get together for a drink, I settled to serious business.

By this time I knew I had a prize in my recording of the monster; Manuel said he didn't even have a still colour-picture of it, nothing but a batch of blurred black-and-whites taken by one of the local people. When I said I had three minutes in colour, he practically climbed down the phone to get at me, and then calmed sufficiently to record a verbal agreement in respect of Latin American rights of thirty seconds of it. I had only sold a North American exclusive to Solar last night, with first-run Eurasian rights as a bonus. They would be after me for a permanency later, I imagined.

Then we got around to other aspects of what had happened. Manuel had been engaged in reading the papers

when I called, and had also had several eyewitness reports which he boiled down for me. None of them differed much from what I'd seen myself. Both government and church had appealed for calm, but so far people seemed more puzzled than hysterical. The monster had been reported from as far away as Lima, and he suspected that not all the sightings had yet come in.

I referred him to the Chilean episode of the day before yesterday. His outfit had carried the story for about two or three hours before it was ousted by a strike in Bogota and a landslide somewhere else. Now they were going to resurrect it.

Very interesting.

When I was through talking to Manuel, I called the number I had been given by the reception clerk. It proved to be one of the departments of the starship base, and a fresh-faced young UN officer went up on the screen directly I gave my name.

He said, "Mr. Drummond! Glad to make your acquaintance. I've always admired your work. My name's Brandt, assistant chief, personnel. I have the job of notifying the relatives of *Starventure*'s crew and informing them of the arrangements for when the crew is landed. Of course, I must admit it's all a bit indefinite—we don't even have a date until after the de-briefing and quarantine and so on—but when the press department told me you were here I thought I'd let you know who to keep in touch with. I hear, incidentally, that you were first with the news again."

I said, "Sheer chance."

He smiled conspiratorially, as though certain it was really some reporter's sixth sense which had brought me to Quito at the crucial time. "Well, naturally the fact that you have a brother in the crew of the ship will entitle you to facilities when they land, and I thought I'd tell you that we have no objection to your exercising your privileges even though you are—or rather were, isn't that right?—a reporter. I don't know if this inside position earns black looks from your colleagues, but it certainly won't from us."

I made up my mind that I didn't like Brandt. I couldn't

recollect that anyone had needed to excuse me for being Leon's brother at the time of the launching, nor that my colleagues had regarded this as unfair. If the idea had occurred to this young smoothie, he probably had *that* sort of mind, or else he was genuinely interested in getting acquainted and wanted a specious excuse to talk to me. The hell with him, either way.

By this time, I thought, Professor Acosta might be available at the observatory again. Before *Starventure* entered orbit the city would be crawling with top scientific talent, but right now Acosta was about as top as came handy. I finished with Brandt and called the outside number of the observatory.

Busy line. I wasn't at all surprised. I stayed patiently at the phone, calling one time after another, for a good five minutes before I hit a break in the flow. A harassed switchboard operator came on a voice-only circuit.

I identified myself and asked to speak to Acosta, and she told me sharply that Acosta was far too busy to talk to anybody. Before she could cut the connection, though, I recalled what Acosta had said the previous afternoon—that for me and a few others in my line he could always spare a little while—and persuaded her to remind him of his own words. I waited.

Acosta looked annoyed when his face went up on the screen, but he addressed me evenly.

"Good morning, Mr. Drummond. I am sure you are inquiring what I think of the strange appearance in the sky last night."

"I'm looking for authoritative comments," I agreed. "Can you—"

I got no further. He leaned forward towards the phone and spoke with passionate emphasis.

"*No,* Mr. Drummond! I saw the thing in the sky last night. All my preconceptions, all my common sense, told me, 'It's impossible!' Yet I saw the thing. There was a photograph in my morning newspaper, showing it was no mere hallucination. Yesterday I was a sober scientist. Today I feel like a . . . a fool. Because there is no room in my science for

monsters in the sky. Yesterday I could agree with you that those people in Chile were naive, and that they saw the Aurora Australis. Today I will keep my mouth shut. Sorry, Mr. Drummond. But . . . good-bye."

The screen blanked. I was still staring at it when the hotel's own operator cut in to ask if I'd like to take an outside call for myself; absently I agreed, and Carmen's face went up on the screen. She looked and sounded troubled.

"David, you are Leon's only close relation, no?" she said without preamble.

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"I called my home, and everyone was joyful about the ship returning. But my father said that my nephew Hermanos—the one who is six years old and was named for my brother because he was born the same day of the year—little Hermanos came home yesterday from school and said he had seen his namesake-uncle on his way there in the morning. They are all saying it is a good sign, that he is safe, except my grandmother, who says it shows he is in danger. What am I to think, David?"

"I was just talking to Professor Acosta," I said. "His view is that it's best to try not to think about it at all at the moment, and I guess he's being sensible."

"You have learned nothing new?"

"Nothing important." I hesitated. "But I'm going to call New York, and then I'm going to see Chambord at the UN press office. Shall we meet for lunch, same place as yesterday?"

"Yes. Yes please, David. But earlier than yesterday. A half hour earlier."

Sandler looked haggard. He paid me an absent-minded compliment about the recording of the monster, and then demanded to know whether I'd found out anything about the material he had sent me.

I told him no, and moreover I still hadn't really fathomed the thinking behind his choice of items.

"It wasn't thinking," he said. "It was feeling. There comes a time when coincidences— Say, do you cook?"

I knew cookery was a hobby of his; to me, it was something you hired done. I said, "No. Why?"

"Never made a white sauce? It's mainly milk, butter, flour. You stir it over the heat and the flour cooks. There comes a moment when it's cooked through, and instead of flour-and-milk you have a white sauce. You can't see the change; you feel it through the way your spoon moves. It can't be described. Same thing about those stories I picked up. I worked two or three of the regulars half to death over them; then I had a bright idea and thought of asking you to scratch the itch for me."

He sighed. "Well, it looks as though I was on to something. But it doesn't help to postulate a connection with the return of the starship, does it?"

I told him what Acosta had said, and he grunted. "Pretty much what scientists up here told us, those that believe something has actually happened, anyway. The others scoff and say don't bother me, *Starventure* got back and I'm busy."

"Are you sending anyone from Solar down here?" I said.

"Are we not!" He snorted. "Granted, you're an ace in the hole and worth your weight in gold, but would we risk your dropping dead or selling out? Kaye Green, Brian Watchett and Don Hapgood will be in Quito this afternoon; they have your hotel address and will get in touch when they arrive. If you get anything, anything at all, which seems interesting, let them have it, will you? Don't forget you're on a ten thousand per week retainer as of yesterday, and we want something for it."

"You'll get it," I said. "If it's there to be had."

I cut the connection thoughtfully. Kaye, Brian and Don—all old friends of mine, of course—were *the* top trio on the Solar Press staff. Aside from the purely scientific angle, I was going to be a fifth wheel when they showed up—and of course aside from having a brother in the crew.

That suited me fine.

I headed for the UN press office on the way to my lunch date. I found, as I'd expected, that the foyer was full of hopeful cubs camping out on the benches, some asleep, some trying to sleep, some trying to stay awake. They'd

probably been there all night. Well, they'd learn. Henri Chambord was as good a public relations man as you could find, and scrupulously honest with his news releases. I'd got a beat by turning up in his office yesterday, but if I'd gone down on bended knee and begged him to go slow on preparing the full release he'd have spat in my face.

I didn't get in to see Chambord this morning; Ramona told me he was tied up in a conference about how to handle interviews with the crew if they checked out free of infection. It was known that the odds were a billion to one against alien germs surviving in a human body-environment, but the chance would have to be taken into account.

So I contented myself with finding out the state of the preparations—tugs beginning to match velocities with *Starventure* now, TV relays being set up, and so on. They were still transmitting code-groups only, but when the range was short enough for voice communication it was hoped to have a planet-wide broadcast of messages to the world. That about covered it.

I apologised to Ramona for scaring her yesterday when I stormed in, she smiled charmingly and giggled not so charmingly, and I went to lunch with Carmen.

VI

WHEN CARMEN and I took our places opposite each other at our table, neither of us said anything for a long time; we just looked. When I did speak, the words came of themselves.

"I've been thinking that I knew you pretty well because I met you first more than two years ago," I said. "But I've seen you—what?—on not more than fifty days out of seven

hundred plus. And I just realised I don't know you at all, because I never saw you so serious as you are now."

She didn't answer.

"It suits you," I said, fumbling for the reason why, and suddenly getting it. "It exalts you, that's the word. I can see a steady intense glow of personality behind your face—the glow which always flickers there and makes men look at you twice without knowing why. But this time it's turned on full. My God, it's almost terrifying!"

I literally felt I was seeing her for the first time. She had a presence like a stormcloud.

A smile lit the cloud, and seemed to show me the whole world as lightning whipcracks darkness away from a landscape.

"Dear David," she said. "Do you know why I'm so serious? Because I'm afraid of going mad. If it were not for you being so sane and yet having the same thing happen to you, I'd be unable to think clearly at all."

"Is it what happened to your nephew that frightens you?"

"A vision of Hermanos—that doesn't frighten me. I accept the gift of second sight, as I told you yesterday. My nephew is only six, but some children are said to have the power. It was children who last saw the fairies; it was the innocence of children that turned them from cruel, capricious creatures into beings as pretty and harmless as butterflies."

"Children are not all that innocent," I said. "They can be heartlessly savage."

"Children who are sincerely loved are innocent," Carmen insisted. "If they are cruel, it's to revenge on weaker creatures wrongs done to them by stronger ones. But I didn't want to talk about children."

"You're not going crazy," I said. "I never met anyone saner in my life—now or at any other time."

She stared down at her hands, and her fingers trembled. She said, "These visions of Hermanos, yours of Leon . . . those I can take calmly. But the monster in the sky—"

"All Quito saw that!" I cut in. "Acosta saw it, a sober scientist with an international reputation. My hackie this morning saw it. Maybe the universe is crazy. We aren't."

"The universe does not go insane. What I fear is to find I have *imagined* that all Quito saw it, and you also. Sometimes the power—like boiling water poured into a cold glass—can break the receiving vessel." She leaned forward and laid an imploring hand on top of mine. "What is happening, David? You understand science—tell me what's happening!"

"It seems probable that it's something to do with the return of *Starventure* to normal space," I said slowly.

"That tells me nothing. Might these things not have happened at any other time? The thing in the sky over Chile was seen before the ship returned; your chief in New York compiled his strange events before he knew about the ship, and if you hadn't come by chance to Quito you'd have heard about all of them before you knew, either."

"I'm sorry," I said, shrugging. "I have no other ideas. Have you?"

She nodded. "I told you I'd like to find out whether anyone else who has a relation aboard *Starventure* had a vision like yours and mine. I think we'll find the answer is yes. What it will mean if it is, I don't know. But it will be another fact, and we have so desperately few."

The Solar Press team arrived as Sandler had promised, in the middle of the afternoon. They called my hotel from the airport, and I arranged to meet them at the UN press office. Chambord was in conference again, but had promised a statement at six in the evening, so I took them to a bar to give them a breakdown on any angles they might need.

Don Hapgood was a recording specialist—he could transcribe anything except a tone of voice, and sometimes even that, into print. Kaye Green, a bony redhead with a walk like a horse's, was usually employed on rewrite work where her talent for getting gut-wrenching emotion into prosaic facts showed to best advantage. Only the biggest stories drew her from her New York desk, but this one of course was a giant. As for Brian Watchett, he knew *everybody;* he had contacts on all continents and at least some of the other planets, and could be relied on to turn up the man who knew the inside

story. Short of coming here himself, Sandler could hardly have put Solar Press in a stronger position.

Over beers, I told them my side of the story. When I got to the bit about the monster in the sky, they wanted to see the recording again, so since I still had the crystals in the recorder we adjourned to a pay-phone booth and crammed into it while I played it over. We could scarcely breathe, but that was no drawback—for those three minutes we either didn't want to breathe or didn't dare. The replay was almost worse than the original. It was a reminder in broad daylight of what reason wanted to class as a bad dream.

We went back to our table quietly and soberly. It was some while before Brian broke the silence, fixing me with his gaze.

"David, there's a story going around that all this has something to do with the return of *Starventure*. Is that fact, or is it a brainwave of Hank Sandler's?"

"I figure it will be three days before we can get an answer to that," I said. "When the top talent has got here and settled in, we'll have a chance to bother them. Up till then, they'll be too busy and too excited."

"Give us your answer," Don said. "Your brother worked on the stardrive—some of it must have rubbed off."

"All right. I think it's conceivable. As you know, during the operation of the drive *Starventure* ceases to exist in our normal universe, but the crew remain aware—their hearts beat, their clocks continue to tick away time. Any relativistic effects observable at the time of switching on the drive are—hell, it gets abstruse at that point, and anyway it's irrelevant. What matters is that in our universe only the potential of *Starventure* continues to exist, and as it were trickles to a point nearer Alpha Centauri, but subjectively a 'real' ship and a 'real' crew continue to exist. The snag is—"

"Where?" said Brian softly.

"Exactly. For convenience, we say—because existence implies some kind of space to exist *in*—we say 'hyperspace' and describe it as non-Einsteinian. But we're only sticking on labels. My guess is that the label 'hyperspace' has a real referent, and that hyperphotonic velocity is real, not sub-

jective, so that when the ship 'slows' to re-enter normal space you get a surging front of—of ripples in the continuum, with accompanying energies, like Cherenkov radiation."

I'd always been glad I took up science reporting after they started to teach Einsteinian instead of Newtonian principles in schools; even Kaye seemed to be following me, though she was woefully unscientific. She had to be—professionally, she depended on thick-clotted emotion, not logic.

But it was that which carried her over a jump that no one else I knew had yet attempted. She said, "Did *Starventure* bring these things through from the other universe it's been travelling in?"

An automatically contemptuous retort died on my lips as I realised I'd been subconsciously wondering the same thing. I still hadn't said anything when Brian grunted and spoke up.

"They ran a robot ship all around the solar system first," he said. "Nothing like this happened then."

It didn't follow. I said so. "The robot ship was tiny compared to *Starventure*. Statistical uncertainty prevents us moving large masses over short distances with any accuracy. In fact Alpha Centauri is barely far enough away to offer a convenient journey for a ship that size. The robot ship was big enough for cats and rabbits, but they hadn't even fired a ship big enough for a man before they launched *Starventure*—it would have had to go nearly a lightyear."

"Some kind of exponential relationship?" frowned Don, keeping up manfully.

"I have a note of it somewhere," I said, nodding. "All the indices are irrationals, and there are lots of them."

At that point Kaye made it obvious that she hadn't heard a word since she last spoke up, for she said to the air, "Things from another universe. My God, what a story."

"Don't write it," I said. "In heaven's name! Isn't there enough to be going on with?"

For a short answer: no. Oh, there was plenty of excitement on the surface. Quito was boiling. The airport, the streets, the rail terminal, the hotels, all crammed to bursting-point as visitors poured in—reporters, sightseers, the crew's re-

lations, scientists, UN high brass, creating plenty of minor detail for Don to tape, Kaye to edit and cable to New York. Optimistic city officials ordered the municipal banners hung out in the streets where they had been when *Starventure* left. Prices doubled.

In the midst of all this, poor Carmen had to maintain her normal daily round of work, friends and family. It wasn't so bad for me; I could find moments to close my eyes and picture Leon to myself and think a burning question—*Leon, has it changed you to go among the stars? Are we still good friends as well as brothers?*

But Carmen's face showed a distant pain.

It didn't help to ease her mind when, every time she begged me for information, I had to say that I'd learned nothing. I wasn't kidding. Somewhere there was a wall.

And it wasn't a boycott aimed at me, either, which was frustrating me. Virtually every science correspondent and science writer on Earth had converged on Quito, and all day long I was being greeted by old acquaintances in twenty different versions of highly-accented English. When I pinned my colleagues down long enough to compare notes, their experience confirmed mine.

Not since ancient Athens had such a dazzling display of intellect assembled in one city. Every Nobel prizewinner for science of the last decade was in town. Could I get to talk to any of them? Not on the bottom of the Pacific. I met someone I was anxious to interview walking down the street and said, "Professor, I'm David Drummond. I wonder if—" I got a headshake on the instant. On the phone, the answer was, "The doctor's in conference right now, at the starship base. Try again tomorrow."

There was no hope of getting into the spaceport itself; I had been over it before the launching, and I knew how tight the security was. Currently, they were busy and shouldn't be interrupted; once or twice a day there was a takeoff or landing, more of the former than the latter, and this was fast for so complicated a job. I watched a couple of the takeoffs through high-powered glasses, sitting on a nearby mountain and asking myself why so many scientific

notables should be spending so *long* in conference down there. No matter how hard I hauled on the grapevine, I couldn't find an answer.

The same evening we first saw *Starventure* shining by the light of Old Sol as she settled into orbit, a blue-dripping monster with claws as big as itself appeared over a rock called Santadonna Island in the South Pacific.

On the island was a satellite-tracking station, and the team recorded so much data that—although by now monsters were coming thick and fast—this one became a standard of reference. It spanned four hundred miles from tip to tip and moved irregularly, like a spastic crab. Its brightness was not much higher than that of the Milky Way, and the patches of its body which seemed black proved to be radiating in the ultraviolet.

And its mass, apparently, was *nil*. Someone assumed for the sake of calculation that it had a density close to that of protoplasm (which was absurd anyway; protoplasm four hundred miles across implied a thinly-spread amoeba) and worked out that at the limits of the atmosphere it ought to have noticeable gravitational effects. None were recorded. Moreover, it had no appreciable orbital velocity. Consequently it ought to have come down like the Arizona Meteorite. It hadn't done so.

On the rare occasions when I did see Quito's famous scientific visitors coming from or going to the starship base, they looked uniformly depressed. Grimly, I wondered if it was the weighing and measuring of the Santadonna Monster which affected them—because weighing and measuring lent an air of authenticity to the reports—or whether it was something else. Something directly to do with *Starventure*.

Maybe to do with Leon.

Hell and damnation, what was shutting their mouths?

VII

IF I KNEW Henri Chambord, he was being as kind as possible about his job, but the fact remained. He was giving out information drop by drop, and over the next few days it turned into a kind of Chinese water-torture.

Drip: Alpha Centauri had planets, not habitable.

Next day—drip: experts had gone up to *Starventure*'s orbit. The crew landed on two planets and fourteen moons and asteroids. They had to be examined for alien infections.

The day after—drip: personal messages from the crewmen to their families. Mine was very short, but it was typical of Leon and therefore quite reassuring. When Leon was about fourteen or so he used to accuse me of being a Big Brother in the Orwell sense as well as literally, having just read 1984 as background to a school history class. So it was appropriate for his message to run: "Don't look now, but I think Big Brother is watching me."

The next day another drop, and the next and the next. But no pictures of the crew, nor of the Centaurian planets, and no chance of interviews by radio.

Something was wrong.

On the evening of the seventh day after the return Brian Watchett came into my hotel dining-room just as I and Carmen were taking our places for dinner. I hadn't seen him in two days, but that wasn't surprising—there were plenty of important people in Quito, and he was probably doing better with the politicians than I was doing with the scientists. He was very disturbed.

"David, I've got to have a word with you," he said without ceremony, and glanced at Carmen. I introduced him. She gave a nod.

"Is it anything about—up there?" she said.

"Yes," Brian said.

"Then perhaps you'd like me to leave you, David?" She made to rise, but I put my hand out to stop her.

"Carmen also has a brother aboard *Starventure,*" I told Brian. "Anything you can tell me she can hear, and it won't go further."

He hesitated, but agreed. I had the waiter show us to a more secluded table and gave our order to him, and the moment the man moved away Brian plunged ahead.

"David, something has gone extremely wrong with *Starventure.*"

Carmen put her hand to her mouth. I pressed my knee against hers under the table and tried to answer in a level voice.

"I've been suspecting it," I said. "How do you know?"

"Did you know that the Chairman of the General Assembly was in Quito? Or that the Secretary-General was here yesterday and left again this morning? Of course you didn't. Practically no one was told. That's one reason. Another reason is that three people have cried off appointments with me, pleading unexpected commitments. I think they were lying. They were warned off by the UN staff."

I glanced at Carmen. Her face was pale and set. I said, "Same thing with me. I can't reach any of the major scientists who've come here. They'll generally talk to me when they won't talk to ordinary reporters, but this time nothing!"

There was a growling sound in the distance, and people stopped talking for a moment to listen to it. I did the same; when it died away, I jerked my head in the direction of the spaceport.

"Another thing. I've been counting takeoffs and landings at the port. They've made enough trips to bring down the entire crew, or all their records, or geological specimens, or *anything*. That was another landing—the tenth since she was brought into orbit. I agree with you, Brian."

"Then we're going to have to blow it open," he said matter-of-factly. "Have you heard some of the irresponsible speculations going around? I was talking to Hank a few minutes ago, and he chilled my blood. People are getting impatient, and the monsters are fraying their nerves. They're avenging angels set to punish man for his trespassing in heaven—or, a bit more sanely, they're creatures from Centaurus getting

ready to invade Earth. He said he'd been approached by the high brass and asked to put out a denial of any connection between the monsters and the ship—"

"Did he consent?"

"Hank? He threw them out of his office, saying he wasn't a government soft-soaper, he was an honest reporter. *You* know how he is. He said that if the public doesn't get some solid fact to satisfy them after the big buildup there'll be trouble. He suggested I get together with you, and . . ."

"And what?"

"I don't know. Perhaps go to Chambord, or this man Brandt who's in charge of personnel matters, or to General Cassiano himself out at the base—anyone who will take us seriously. We must say that unless we are given—at once!—convincing reasons for not doing so, we will publish tomorrow morning our grounds for thinking they are concealing facts of public importance. We've got to force the truth into the open, David. If there's been a disaster, delaying the announcement will only make things worse in the end."

I pushed back my chair. I had suddenly realised that I was too badly worried about Leon to waste any more time.

Carmen came with us. Neither of us thought of telling her to stay behind, and she probably wouldn't have agreed anyway. We went to see Chambord first.

Good pressman that he was, his first comment when he heard our argument was a sigh of relief.

"Believe me, my friends," he said, "I'm not sorry you've decided on this course. I myself have pestered General Cassiano till I'm exhausted; I've pleaded to be told at least why I could have no more news—oh, I've passed on every fact I've been given! I'd suggest that you go and put pressure on Herr Brandt. He's a weak man. He will cave in and let you through to higher authority where anyone else at a similar administrative level would adroitly start you running in circles. May I wish you good luck?"

His estimate of Brandt squared with mine. I thanked him for the advice and the good wishes, and we headed for the base personnel department. This was an ugly group of low

concrete building housing administrative offices and barracks for the technical personnel, several miles away from the actual port—where for fear of accidents there was only the absolute minimum of technical facilities. It took us some time to get anyone to locate Brandt for us, but in the end we managed it.

He reacted as Chambord had predicted. His first pretence of amiability at having distinguished visitors faded swiftly and gave way to prevarication and pleas; we wore those down, and he threatened to have us thrown off the premises and debarred from UN-sponsored press conferences. We countered with a threat to name him as having willfully withheld personal messages from the crew to their relatives. At that point he started to shout at us, and this was what unexpectedly won our battle.

He had received us in an office on the ground floor of the main building, which also contained bachelor quarters for senior staff officials not living in Quito with their families. The walls were badly soundproofed. When Brandt raised his voice, he could probably be heard three or four rooms away.

All at once the door of the office was thrown open, and an angry man strode in. "Brandt!" he snapped. "I'm trying to get one hour of rest before I go back, and you're yelling like a madman!"

The newcomer was tall, thickset and brown-haired; on the shoulders of his olive-green UN uniform he wore two general's stars. He looked familiar. I was still trying to place him when Brian got to his feet.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, General Suvorov," he said, and went on to summarise why we had come. I hardly heard him, I was so annoyed with myself for not recognising him: second-in-command to General Cassiano, of course.

I looked at Carmen's face, absolutely still, very white. I tried to give her a reassuring smile, but she didn't notice.

Suddenly Brian uttered my name, nudging me to pick up my cue. I did so, standing up with Suvorov's hard eyes on me.

"I happen to be both a reporter and brother to a member of the starship's crew," I said. "*Starventure* has been in orbit for a week, and all I've heard about my brother is a message of a few words and a vague assurance that he's all right. I don't believe it. I don't believe anything is all right. And if I don't get positive information at once, I propose to tell the world what I think."

Suvorov nodded at Carmen, asking me a question with his eyes.

"Señorita Iglesias also has a brother in the crew," I said.

He came to a snap decision. "Very well," he said heavily. "You shall know. I warn you, you won't be permitted to publish the information, but your better judgment will probably agree that it's wiser not to. Brandt, get me a car at the door at once. The hell with my resting—how can anyone rest at a time like this?"

Brandt gulped and snatched at his phone. Suvorov looked briefly at Carmen again.

"I'm sorry for you, Miss Iglesias," he said after a pause. "We are all sorry for everyone."

Puzzled, hesitant, and—speaking for myself—afraid of what we were going to learn, we went out to the car when it arrived. Suvorov made the driver move over into the passenger seat and took the wheel himself; Brian, Carmen and I got in behind. I could feel Carmen trembling when I put my arm around her shoulders.

Suvorov switched on all four headlamps and the spots as well, spun the car almost in its own length, and sent us plunging down a beam of white-yellow light into the dark fastness of the mountains.

He was a terrifying driver. The road was twenty-five miles long, although the base was only fifteen miles distant, and clung crazily to the edge of precipieces, twisting and turning. Previously I'd only travelled it by day. I would rather not have travelled it at all.

Other vehicles approached, and Suvorov hit a switch on the dash, which flashed the car's lights in a coded rhythm.

The other vehicles pulled to the side and we went swaying past without slowing. None of us said anything.

The road swooped down towards the starship base. Fierce lights bathed the three-mile-wide artificial plateau, revealing two ferries on the ground—one being unloaded of some cargo, the other being fuelled for a return leap to the sky. At a barrier closing the road, sentries signalled with lights, and Suvorov made the tires cry out as he braked. He looked out of the window and shouted in Esperanto; the sentries saluted and waved us through.

He parked the car just beyond the barrier and curtly told us to get out. We obeyed, and followed him around a narrow concrete path to an opening in the side of a vast rock—part of the mountains themselves, apparently. Huge soundproof and airtight doors stood open, giving access to a wide corridor. There was a smell of electricity and a noise of machinery and of people talking.

He led us for perhaps five minutes along the corridor, acknowledging salutes from junior personnel as they came in the opposite direction, and at last halted before a sliding door on which he rapped authoritatively. The door opened.

Beyond was a low-ceilinged room where men and women with tense faces sat around a table stacked with large coloured photographs. One woman was on her feet, as though she had been addressing the others; both she and her audience looked astonished at us and Suvorov.

"Sorry to interrupt," the general said brusquely. "I want to show these people a copy of Forty-Nine."

The woman sighed and shuffled through a pile of photos in front of her; she selected one and handed it to Suvorov, who passed it to me. He didn't say anything. I stared at it.

I saw a thing with eyes like pits, jointed limbs disposed around a blocky body. A cold suspicion began to crush my mind, frigid, petrifying.

"I said, "What has a picture of one of the sky-monsters to do with—?"

Suvorov's brown eyes were suddenly full of a melting pity, and his voice was gentle as he interrupted me.

"No, Mr. Drummond. That is not a sky-monster. That—so far as we can establish—is the present form of your brother Leon Drummond."

VIII

I said, "My—my *brother?*" And finished it in my mind, because I couldn't bear to hear the actual words spoken: *Leon, turned to a many-legged monster? How? Why?*

For a long while—it seemed an eternity—my words hung in the still air. No one moved or spoke. I could not even blink my eyes, I was so horribly fascinated by the picture in my hand.

Suddenly Carmen broke the spell. She snatched the photograph from me and looked at it. Her mouth worked. Her eyes widened.

And then she screamed.

It was the most dreadful noise I had ever heard in my life—a raw, throat-tearing sound as uncontrollable as sobbing, but *fierce*. In the low-ceilinged, rock-walled room it battered back at us.

I would have moved to comfort Carmen—put my arms around her—but for a moment I was still too dazed. Suvorov reacted at once. He brought the flat of his spade-shaped hand against her cheek with surgical accuracy; the slap, like a switch operating, ended the screaming, and Carmen's eyes closed as she rocked on her heels. The slapped cheek began to colour angry red against the pallor of the rest of her face.

"Sorry," Suvorov said curtly. "But hysteria isn't going to get us anywhere."

"If you've quite finished, general . . ." said the woman standing at the table.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to have interrupted you." Suvorov turned to us. "Come with me—we'll go somewhere where we won't disturb anybody."

Brian, his hand shaking a little, took the photograph from Carmen's limp fingers and asked with his eyes if he could bring it; the woman standing at the table nodded him permission. He fell in behind Suvorov as the general made for the door. I stepped to Carmen's side, put my arm around her, and urged her gently to come after. She obeyed like a marionette, unsteadily placing one foot in front of the other, not looking where she was going.

Again Suvorov led us down a stone-walled corridor in the heart of the mountain, this time bringing us to what was obviously a technical section, with a gallery facing on to the actual port. We caught a glimpse of the night outside, the floodlights and the work in progress on rocket ferries as he gestured us to accompany him into a small bright-lit office.

There were just enough chairs for all of us. He took his place behind a bare desk and slid a box of cigarettes towards us, and then tilted back his own chair and ran his fingers through his cropped brown hair.

He said, "Believe me, you aren't as shocked at this moment as we were a week ago."

The statement seemed ridiculous to me, lost as I was in my white fog of dismay. But my mind was too numb for me to be able to say so. Beside me I could feel the trembling of Carmen's body; I heard her teeth chatter. Nobody could be more shocked than we were, I thought.

I looked at Brian, who sat with his elbows on his knees leaning forward and staring down at the photograph he held in both hands. He was sweating, but he was calmer than either Carmen or myself. Naturally. He didn't have a brother to become a monster.

Without raising his eyes, he said, "Are they all like this?"

Carmen tensed fractionally, and then, on Suvorov's nod, sighed and let go again.

"Why?" Brian snapped. "How?"

"What do you think we're trying to find out?" Suvorov countered edgily. He took a cigarette from the box on the

desk—a long Russian one with a built-in pasteboard holder—bent the tube at right angles and lit it. "You still understand that telling you this isn't giving you a licence to publish, don't you? You're probably claiming that the officially imposed silence gives rumours a chance to spread—true enough, but better ill-founded rumours than truth of this kind!"

Brian slid the photo on to the desk with an angry gesture. He said, "Maybe, maybe not. Is this—this transformation a simple result of starflight? Is this the price all the crews of starships are going to have to pay? To me, it looks too high!" He passed his hand over his face.

I found my voice at last. I said, "How can that *thing* be my brother? What makes you say it is?"

Suvorov closed his eyes. He said, "They aren't equipped for talking at present, and there are psychological problems—what they are exactly I don't know, because I'm not an expert. Who the hell *is* an expert on this?" he added with sudden violence. "But most of them can write fairly well. He's one who can." He pointed at the desk top without looking.

"Excuse me," Carmen said thinly. "Why are you talking as though these things are people in different forms? Why aren't they alien creatures that have taken the crew's place?"

I wished my mind had been tough enough to arrive at an idea like that so quickly. Not that the alternative suggestion was any consolation—it led to other questions, like: where are the crew themselves?

Suvorov said tiredly, "Did you have a message from your brother, Miss Iglesias? Some messages have been released."

Carmen nodded.

"Did it strike you as being—in character?"

"Yes."

"So did mine," I cut in. "But that proves nothing—the message could have been faked up by someone who'd studied the psychology of the crewmen before departure." I sounded doubtful even to myself. *Could* anyone have selected that comment of all possible ones—except Leon, whom it fitted so well I could practically hear his voice speaking it, slightly

bored, slightly mocking, but patiently accepting the need for long surveillance after the journey.

"Why are you so ready to assume we're against you, Drummond?" Suvorov said, opening his eyes. "We're on your side. We're just as eager as you to get to the bottom of the problem. We haven't achieved much so far because, of all the emergencies we prepared for, this wasn't on the list. Suppose you give me five minutes with no interruption and I'll tell you all I can."

The first inkling that something was amiss came when *Starventure* swung within voice communication range of the tugs sent out to gentle her into orbit, and continued to transmit code instead of switching to maseradio. But in the excitement of the moment no serious notice was taken; it was assumed that a breakdown in the equipment explained the anomaly.

The tugs brought *Starventure* into orbit, and silence followed.

Alarmed, a boarding party went to investigate, and found the suiting-chamber of the main spacelock occupied by two apparently monstrous creatures in a state of total catalepsy. The party must have consisted of brave men; they were unarmed, but they never thought of going back. They continued into the ship, finding everything apparently normal except the crew. It was some little while before they came on any more alien beasts; when they did, the meeting was perfectly crazy.

Apparently—so Suvorov reported the psychologists' findings—none of the crewmen had any idea they were physically altered until they came face to face with irrefutable evidence. The pair found in catalepsy in the suiting-chamber were examples of this; they had gone to get into spacesuits, and found that they had too many limbs and their bodies were of the wrong shape. The shock paralysed them, and they were found still unable to resolve the problem.

When other members of the crew met the boarding-party, they reacted exactly as normal human beings would—provided that they had none of their colleagues for reference. A

single crewman would come happily to greet his fellow humans, and be dismayed at their startlement. Two or more together realised by looking at the newcomers and then at each other what had happened to them, and the result was again cataleptic shock.

Naturally the first explanation that sprang to mind, Suvorov told us, was the one which Carmen had voiced: that the crew had somehow been replaced during the trip with alien beings. In a sense, of course, this was so—at least, their human bodies had been transformed, or exchanged, or . . . something.

But the personalities of the crew were there, reflected in their strange new shapes. They could not talk, but they could communicate with each other and to a limited extent retained the ability to write. Some areas of common human experience had been blanked off for them, while other areas of experience which were not human at all seemed to have opened up.

"That's where the psychologists are having such difficulty," Suvorov said. "For instance: although the bodies in which the crew's minds now seem to be housed are much more different one from another than human bodies, having various types and numbers of limbs, various distribution of bodily organs, and so on, they all share the ability to sense radiant energy far down into the ultraviolet. Tests are still going on. They appreciate the passage of time rather differently from us; it was necessary to set up a computer to handle the questioning of the one who seems to be Chandra Dan. Don't ask me for details. I was just told what I'm telling you."

"How did you get around the catalepsy problem?" Brian said.

"Some of them were resilient enough to adjust to what had happened, and became able to move among ordinary people quite quickly—another strange point, by the way, is that these new bodies are oxygen-breathing and can consume ordinary food, though some extra trace-elements are required. Others returned to normal when they were isolated from anybody except their fellow crewmen. We're in process

of setting up a makeshift headquarters for investigation—if you've been keeping track of the launchings from this port, you'll have realised we were shipping out a lot of material. That's why."

"When was it—done to them?" Carmen said faintly.

"During the return trip. Probably, just before their re-emergence into normal space. We have the pictures they took in the Centaurus system, and some of them show members of the crew normally suited-up, which would have been impossible if the change had taken place there. We have a few records from the voyage home which include a glimpse of normal hands or fingers."

"And what did this to them?" Brian said. "What's the connection between these—new bodies of theirs and the monsters in the sky which have been seen lately? The resemblance is amazing."

Suvorov shook his head, looking unutterably weary. "We don't know. We have only one working hypothesis, and I don't understand it, but for what it's worth . . . It's been suggested that there are creatures in hyperspace which are—intelligent? No, too strong a word. Curious, perhaps. And that to them a body has no individuality, but is regarded as we regard a vehicle. That by some means we can't fathom we attracted their attention with *Starventure;* during its return trip, they took the crew's bodies, replacing them with what they thought would be satisfactory substitutes, in order to study them. Now they are showing an interest in Earth itself, and owing to the different physical qualities of the continuum they inhabit, we see them projected on the sky as they look us over."

Brian looked at me for comment. I struggled to marshal my untidy thoughts.

"It sounds as though it would call for a complete new world-picture to accommodate the hypothesis," I said. "I get the idea—but—oh, I can't think properly right now."

Brian turned to Suvorov again. He said, "Maybe it is better not to publish the facts until there's been a complete investigation. But you can't make do with mere denials. An alternative story will have to be released—preferably some-

thing with only half-lies in it, that can be amplified over a period of some weeks and stifle hysterical rumours."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right, Brian," I said. "I—I guess I could write the story if I had to. In fact I'll do it on one condition."

Suvorov looked at me expressionlessly. I went on, "I'd like to—to meet my brother."

"I think I can arrange that," Suvorov nodded. "If that's your wish. You are, after all, in a rather special position compared to most of the crew's relations. But how about Miss Iglesias?"

We all glanced at Carmen. After a moment she shook her head and shrugged. "No," she said. "I don't believe that my brother is there in the ship. I've seen him—not as a monster, but alive and well."

And Suvorov leapt to his feet as though stuck with a goad. "For God's sake!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you say so before?"

IX

I HAD BEEN on the point of saying something tolerant but weary about Carmen's remark. Suvorov's reaction startled me, and a moment later I was very glad I hadn't spoken.

Before, it had of course seemed ridiculous on the face of it to think that I might *really* have seen Leon—Leon's body—in Quito, or that Carmen and her nephew might have seen Hermanos. Indeed, I'd reacted so strongly against her suggestion that I inquire among the other relatives of the crew for people who had had similar "visions" that I'd dismissed it from my mind completely. I hadn't even mentioned it, that I could recall, to Brian, Kaye or Don, who were old colleagues of mine, and who could certainly have found

time to ask around among the many relations of the crew who were now in Quito.

I looked sharply at Carmen. I didn't like the rather vague expression she wore, which still revealed traces of shock. But her voice and manner were calm enough. She recounted briefly her and her nephew's experiences, and finished by turning to me.

"The same thing happened to you, didn't it, David?"

I nodded.

"Why didn't you report this earlier?" Suvorov demanded again.

"Nobody asked me," Carmen said with a shrug.

"Henri Chambord knew," I muttered, feeling oddly guilty—as though I'd withheld valuable evidence in Leon's favour.

Suvorov hit a button on his desk and leaned back in his chair. He said, "Not that I know this is important, you understand, but any new fact may be valuable."

Carmen looked at me, her head tilted a little, one eyebrow lifted. I guessed what she was thinking. She had said almost exactly the same thing to me when asking me to make those inquiries among the other relatives of the crew.

"Everything you've said, by the way, has been recorded," Suvorov said. "We've been on twenty-four-hour recording since *Starventure* came back to normal space. On the record, I want to remind you formally that everything I've told you is UN-classified and not for public release. Signify that you've understood this warning."

We muttered that we did. It was chastening to move over from the privileged reporter's seat back to the ordinary layman's rôle, but my heart wasn't in telling the public of the catastrophe which had overtaken Leon, and apparently Brian's wasn't either.

The desk phone sounded. Suvorov flipped the switch and said, "Is Dr. Lenister there?"

The sound was directionalised, and we couldn't hear the answer, but it must have been affirmative, for he went on, "Ask him or one of his aides to call in my office for five minutes. I have something new for him, I believe."

Lenister. That would be Herb Lenister, Cornell and

Sorbonne, the psychologist-cyberneticist. Just one of the dozens of notables I'd been struggling to contact for the past week.

If I'd known what they knew, I told myself sourly, *I wouldn't have troubled them.*

Lenister himself turned up—a dapper man, extremely well dressed, with half-rimmed glasses and a gold tooth. He looked worn out, though, and that wasn't surprising. He sat on the corner of Suvorov's desk and nodded acknowledgment of the introductions.

"All right, what's the urgent news?" he said.

"Miss Iglesias here—sister of Hermanos Iglesias, aboard *Starventure*—reports seeing her brother in Quito the day of the re-emergence."

Lenister sighed. "I know," he said. "And Drummond reported something similar to the press chief, Chambord."

"You know?" Brian said incredulously. "You haven't followed it up, though, have you?"

Lenister took off his glasses and wiped them carefully.

"News like that gets around a town which is bubbling the way Quito is at the moment," he said. "I seem to recall that some young cousin of yours—" He glanced at Carmen.

"Nephew," she said quietly.

"Something like that. He also saw your brother, he claimed. As to following it up, Mr. Watchett—he swivelled to face Brian—"there isn't *time*. We have our hands full without investigating all the strange coincidences that are reported to us. Conceivably there was some psychical phenomenon involved in these experiences—I've sent for a trained team of psychic investigators on the assumption that there was—but I don't see any reason not to call them simple coincidence at the moment. These are the only three cases, after all."

"You've made inquiries?" Carmen said sharply.

Lenister nodded. He glanced at his watch and stood up. "I hoped you'll excuse me," he said. "I'm working on some interview material which was landed earlier this evening."

"Wouldn't you prefer to qualify your remarks?" Brian said.

We turned to him in astonishment. I'd seen the look he was wearing before; he was playing a hunch, reading into what Lenister had said something that a thousand other people would have failed to notice.

Lenister blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I hadn't heard about Miss Iglesias's brother, or about Leon Drummond. But I had heard about people who thought they'd seen members of the crew in Quito—I had similar stories from four or five sources directly after my arrival. I checked up, and found that none of the sources was personally acquainted with the crewmen alleged to have been seen. I put it down to over-active imagination. But I'm not so sure any longer."

Carmen said breathlessly, "David and I were the only people in Quito on the day the ship came back—except the rest of my family—related to members of the crew."

Lenister and Suvorov exchanged glances. After a moment Lenister said, "That's a valid point. Is this nephew the only other person to have seen your brother, Miss Iglesias?"

"As far as I know, yes."

I couldn't very well say that I wished Brian had mentioned these rumours to me before—after all, I hadn't told him of my own experience, which would have given him a reason for not dismissing the other similar stories. But I cursed myself for refusing to have the courage of my convictions.

"Look!" I said explosively. "How *can* this be more than—than the product of over-active imagination?" I shot a glance at Brian. "How are these—things, people, bodies, whatever you call them—how are they supposed to have been brought out of space and back to Earth? In a ship?"

Lenister and Suvorov were silent for a while, gazing at me. Finally Lenister stirred.

"You've only just been exposed to the problem," he said in a dispirited voice. "We've had it for a full week, and we're just about learning to discard traditional preconceptions. I think I'd better be blunt. If we can't understand how it is

the crew of *Starventure* happen to occupy monstrous new bodies, which is a solid fact available for study, why in hell should we be able to understand the appearance of their old bodies in Quito? As far as I'm concerned, I'm not worried about a ship. For all I know one of the monsters could have reached down from the sky and set them on their feet like a kid playing with toy soldiers."

He got off the corner of the desk where he had been perching.

"Anyway, it's got to be looked into," he finished. "Though heaven only knows who we can get to take charge of the investigation."

"I'll take that on," Brian said. Once more he was staring at the picture of what was supposed to be Leon, apparently fascinated by it. "It seems to me I'm in an ideal position. I never thought I'd find myself conniving at official censorship. But unless there's a brilliant lie invented to cover this, the world's going to be literally sick with terror."

For the first time since he came into Brandt's office complaining of the noise, Suvorov showed signs of optimism. He said, "I can't think of anyone better qualified, Mr. Watchett. What do you have in mind—tracing these rumours to their source, scotching them where you can, and passing on the information to our people for investigation?"

"That's the size of it," Brian nodded. Still his eyes would not leave the terrible photograph. "And it'll have to be done quickly. You promised David a chance to visit his brother—out at the ship, presumably—in return for his help in inventing a cover story and putting it through the right channels. I don't know if he still wants to go ahead with that; if he doesn't, I'll be glad to work with him, but if not, then I'll tackle it on my own."

"Yes, I want to go ahead with it," I said thickly. My mouth was very dry. "But it'll take a while to set up the trip, I guess. Meantime, I entirely agree with you, Brian. There has to be a covering lie, and it has to be prepared by experts. We'll need Henri Chambord in on it with us—maybe the general could contact him and fix up for us to meet him when we go back into the city. We have to start

the ball rolling tonight, or Hank Sandler will keep his word and Solar Press will put its accusations on the wire tomorrow morning."

"Excuse me," Lenister said. "I'd better get back to work. I'm relieved to hear what you two gentlemen"—nodding at Brian and me—"feel about this, by the way. We've been expecting a public outcry any moment. If you can even stave it off for a week longer, we'll have some chance of making sense of the screwy business."

He went out.

Suvorov cleared his throat. "Mr. Drummond," he said, "now that your colleague has made this offer, I guess it's open to me to cancel my promise and say there's no need to pay the price you asked for your co-operation. I won't do that, though. I'll set up your flight for tomorrow or the next day, and I'll impose only one extra condition. That is that you create an impregnable excuse for your absence. It must not be allowed to leak out that you've been sent up to *Starventure* when none of the other relatives of crewmen has even been permitted to visit the spaceport."

I hesitated a moment. "Yes, I can fix that," I said. "I can rely on Brian, and the other two people from Solar that we have in Quito. Brian, you can spread a few misleading statements, can't you?"

"I'm going to be too busy," Brian grunted. "What's more, if you just have me, Kaye and Don passing the good word, sooner or later some sharp-nosed newshound will arrive at the conclusion that Solar has a beat and you're out after it. We'll have the entire press corps chasing you."

"Hell," I said. He was right, at that. I thought furiously. "Got it. It would make sense if I spent the waiting period on the job that Hank Sandler set up for me even before the starship came back—looking into these monster sightings. I can hint to Manuel Segura that I'm off to those villages in Chile where the first sightings were reported."

"I'm not especially interested in details," Suvorov said. "Just make certain the deception is complete." He checked his watch. "I'd better get you back to Quito now—I'm due to take over my duties in ten minutes, so I'll have to get

you a staff driver. And I'll contact Chambord and make sure he expects you. Be careful how you talk to him—he's an honorable man, and he won't be having the—the persuasive emotional shock which has made up your minds so sensibly." He gave a crooked grin, but it lasted only a moment.

"And—Mr. Watchettl"

Brian looked up.

"That photograph, please," Suvorov said, holding out his hand. "It is a positively unbreakable rule that we do not let such a thing go off the port."

Brian passed back the shiny sheet. He said, "The more I look at that picture, the more I'm convinced that this simply can't be true."

"I'm sure that will be a great help in preparing your cover story for us," Suvorov commented ironically. "One last point: you must of course advise us of your proposals. Even if they reach us at six o'clock in the morning, we shall have plenty of competent authorities to approve them. We have more top scientific talent within three miles of this spot, getting less sleep for a longer time, than ever in human history."

"And if you don't like our suggestions?" I had to say it, and a moment later I regretted it. For when Suvorov turned his face to me, it was the face of a haunted man.

"We shall have to like them, shan't we?" he said quietly. "Really, we have no choice. It's that—or worldwide hysteria. Goodbye for the present, then. I shall expect to hear from you in a few hours' time."

We got up. I helped Carmen, who was death-pale, to her feet; then, like pall-bearers under the weight of a giant's coffin, we stumbled back to the waiting car.

X

Our new driver made the return trip at a more reasonable speed than Suvorov had chosen when bringing us, but after what we had learned we were in no mood to appreciate the difference. We went a couple of miles without saying anything, seeing but not noticing the rocky wall of the road loom up, sidestep, vanish as the car's lights played on it.

I stirred at length and made to put my arm comfortingly around Carmen's shoulders. It was like touching a wax doll. When I looked at her, at first I could not see her face; then, as the road curved, the car's lights were thrown back and shed a brief illumination over us. Her eyes were wide, fixed straight ahead, and her lips were moving in utterly soundless speech.

I said, "Carmen!"

For a long moment she didn't answer. I guessed she must be reciting a prayer, and taking the time to finish it. That was a new thing to me; I had never had any idea she might be religious.

"Leave me alone," she said in a voice as dead as the moon.

I tried to object; she turned her head slowly—I could see as once again the headlamps were reflected by the rocks at a bend in the road—and looked at me.

"David, you don't own me," she said. "Leave me alone."

Truly this was not a Carmen I had seen before. I withdrew my arm, feeling a sudden stab of misery as sharp as at the news of an old friend's death. I wondered if I would ever meet my Carmen again.

But Brian, leaning back in the seat beside the driver, was saying something, and I had to tear my attention free and direct it to him. I said, "I'm sorry—I didn't catch that."

"I was asking if you had any definite ideas about the line we take with Chambord."

I put up a hand to rub my forehead, a nervous habit when I try to concentrate.

"No—uh—not yet," I said after a pause. "I'm pretty shaken up by what's supposed to have happened to Leon. I was hoping you might have a suggestion."

"It seems to me there's only one possibility. Here, have a cigarette." He half-turned in the seat and reached the pack towards me. "Carmen, will you—?"

I pushed his hand away. "She wants to be left alone," I muttered emptily. "Go on."

He fumbled on the dash for the car's lighter, found it, and lit his own cigarette. "Well, it's ridiculous to try and hide the fact that something's gone wrong. We have to develop a comparatively innocuous reason for the long delay in returning the crew to Earth. It's just selection of that reason which poses difficulties. Uh—is there a ready-made line available in this quarantine which they would have undergone anyway? I was wondering about an alien organism which might have infected them, so that they can't return to Earth until they've found a cure."

"It stinks," I said. "It will be taken for granted that the crew are all at death's door, in which case there'll be a public outcry for obvious reasons. Besides, every biologist on Earth will prick up his ears and howl for data. The existence of an alien organism capable of preying on human body-tissue would be the biggest news of the century in biology, ecology, biochemistry, palaeobiology . . . No, we couldn't sustain a lie like that."

Brian slapped his open palm on his knee angrily. "Damned fools!" he said harshly. "Sometimes I think there's a truth in the old view of the ivory-tower scientist. It should have been obvious immediately they boarded *Starventure* that something of this sort would become inevitable. They ought to have taken a good public relations man like Henri into their confidence and concocted this fiction right away. Instead, we have seven days of half-truths and mutually inconsistent falsehoods to build on!"

"So right," I muttered, thinking of what he had told me earlier about the rumours which were spawning. "And a story about psychological effects would be equally bad. Even nowadays, people have this instinctive reaction against in-

sanity. We couldn't put it about that the crew have been unbalanced by their experience without destroying the entire—what would you call it?—mythos of spaceflight."

"Don't you think that's going to go out anyway?" Brian said softly.

I tried not to think about the risk of that happening. It wasn't that I myself had any personal emotional involvement with spaceflight—but Leon did, and maybe to a greater extent than I normally cared to admit Leon represented a proxy for me, making the progress in science which I had hoped to make myself but which circumstances compelled me only to report.

In any case, *Starventure* had been seen as an achievement of the "because it's there" kind—possibly the first in history in which the world's people had a vicarious share. No matter how ingenious our concocted lies, the disappointment was going to be appalling.

I switched the subject. "Brian, how long do you envisage this cover story can be made to run?" I asked. "Lenister was being cynical when he talked about a week, but don't you think that may be all the grace we have?"

"It depends on us," he grunted. "Suppose you stop moping and start thinking—or have you got out of the habit since you set off on your own?"

By the time we re-entered the city, we had the skeleton of an idea, which could be treated one of three ways: it could prepare the world for the truth, it could become a permanent lie with a downbeat implication—designed to depress public interest in future starflights and restrain questions about them—or on the billion-to-one level it could be tapered off following a resolution of the problem either through some new discovery or through the decision of the sky-monster to undo their work.

I was so engrossed in fleshing out this skeleton—feeling a kind of perverse pleasure in my own ingenuity—that I almost forgot about Carmen. When the fact occurred to me, we had turned off the main road towards Chambord's house;

the driver, of course, had had instructions from Suvorov to deliver us there.

I tapped him on the shoulder and asked him in Spanish to pull up. Turning to Carmen, I asked if I should find her a cab so she could go home.

She nodded without speaking. The driver, paying attention, suggested that he ought to back up on the main road, where there were usually cabs passing, but Carmen vetoed the proposal. She opened her door and got out.

I jumped out after her and tried to catch her by the arm, but she avoided me. I said, "Carmen, why are you treating me as though it was my fault?"

"I saw my brother," she said. "As you saw yours. This is the truth—it must be! Not a vision, not a monstrous shape, but my brother alive and well."

The words were like stones laid on my mind, crushing me. What the devil was I to do? I hesitated for a moment, thinking that I might ask Brian to go and see Chambord by himself and leave me to take Carmen home and comfort her; she was clearly in a state of extreme emotional shock.

"I shall be all right," she said. "I'm very tired, and you have to do—what you have to do. Look, there's a cab!"

She had spotted, with eyesight that had sometimes surprised me before, the faint distant glow of the HIRE sign on a car's roof. She hurried to the corner of the main road, signalling as the cab approached. The driver saw her and slowed.

"Carmen! Will you at least do one thing for me?" I called, striding after her. "Don't go to your apartment where you'll be alone—go and spend the night with the family!"

I didn't know if that was such a good idea when I thought back on it later. The vision of Carmen fighting her personal devils alone in her apartment through the darkest hours of the night was what prompted me to suggest it. But I'd forgotten that it was from her family she had this streak of—what to call it? Mysticism, credulity, superstition . . .

The cab door slammed. I turned back to the waiting car.

"Think she'll be okay?" Brian asked as I got in. "She was so dazed by all this—"

"Carmen's just about the toughest little person I know," I broke in. I made the assertion with so much vehemence it sounded as though I was trying to convince myself. I was. Brian noticed, but apart from giving me a sidelong frown made no comment.

Well, what I'd said was true, so far as normal matters were concerned. She had a fierce independence and inexhaustible determination. But this wasn't normal.

We were at Chambord's place in another few minutes—a new smart bungalow set back from the road in a rioting garden. A light was on in one of the front windows, and as we shut the car's doors behind us and made towards the house a dark figure appeared in silhouette on the step of the porch.

"David?" Chambord's voice inquired softly. "I heard from General Suvorov, so I suppose you to have got results. My wife is sleeping at the back of the house, so please come in quietly."

He led us into the hallway. There in the light we could see that his eyes were puffy and his expression haggard as they had not been earlier. The sight of his overtiredness made me check my watch for the first time in hours. I was alarmed to see that it was already a quarter of one a.m.

In the room where we had seen the light on, he gave us chairs and—without asking if we wanted it—brought us cups of café—cognac. It was exactly what was called for. I felt my head clear and my spirits revive.

"*Eh bien!*" he said, taking another chair facing ours. "All I know so far is what the general told me: that to forestall the rumours of which you told me earlier it has been decided to make a further release about the crew, and that you two and I must prepare the draft by eight o'clock tomorrow morning." He folded his hands on his lap.

Brian looked at me; we had agreed that, since I was the science-writer of the two, I stood a better chance of getting our lie across convincingly.

"Yes—uh—well . . ." I had to pause and clear my throat. "It looks as though our decision to force a showdown coincided with their decision to come clean. It's clear

to everyone by this time that something has gone wrong, and when we turned up they put us under a bond of secrecy and asked for our co-operation. What it comes down to is this.

"Only experts, and not many of them, know anything about this peculiar non-spatial medium through which starships have to travel—hyperspace or whatever you like to call it. And of course prior to *Starventure*'s trip there had never been an extended test of its effects on human beings. The effects, as it turns out, are both physical and psychological, and some of them are rather serious."

"I see," Chambord nodded. "What, for example?"

"Well, to begin with the long stress of the voyage, especially since for many of the crew it was unbroken—only a small landing party touched down on any of the Centauri worlds—has induced a sort of agoraphobia which will prevent them from being brought off the ship until they're readjusted to the idea of—well, space, and having an open sky above their heads. There are other psychological effects, but that's the worst. And then the physical ones. They wouldn't tell us much about these—I gather they're still being studied—but it seems that human tissue reacts differently in hyperspace. There were some injuries, for example, and despite the best medical care available they healed in peculiar ways; there were also some unexplained metabolic disorders. They're afraid that the re-exposure to Earthside conditions might aggravate this problem instead of reversing it."

There was a long silence. Finally Chambord gave a nod.

"So that's the story," he said. "Very well, if that's how it has to be . . . But I tell you now, I don't believe a word of it."

Thunderstruck, we stared at him.

"Nothing so innocent as what you have told me could account for what we have seen," he went on. "I have been in the UN Press Service most of my working life. I've seen international crises of all sizes from ruffled tempers to incipient nuclear wars, and not one of them has created such a panic. I don't suppose that even I am entitled to the truth?"

He gave us a questioning glance. Neither Brian nor I moved a muscle.

"As you prefer," he sighed. "Now we must set to work on this story you tell me, and conspire to mislead the public, I guess. I know you of old, David. If you come to me and tell me this nonsense, then what has really happened must be very terrible. I am perhaps happier not knowing."

XI

By its third draft, that release was a masterpiece. It was thick and ponderous; it was like an elephant made out of fog. It said all kinds of depressing things in a tone of horrible optimism. According to his mood, one could read into it either a permanent epitaph for startravel, or a paean of praise for the bravery of the crew, or a sober and neutral record of fact.

At about five-thirty, red-eyed and shaking with the effort of our concentration, we got it licked and read it to Suvorov over the phone—Chambord had a scrambled line to the spaceport over which he could take pre-deadline confidential releases.

Suvorov recorded it, told us he was calling together some of the chiefs of department to discuss it, and rang off. We awaited the final reaction with all the nervousness of expectant fathers. It came at six-ten: approved, and accepted as the public cover for the catastrophe.

Chambord picked up the only draft in existence of our superlative lie and folded it into his pocket, looking gloomy.

"So I will take this down to the press office and have it 'faxed," he said. "And at eight o'clock it will be released. After that . . ."

"After that, what?" I said, dropping into an armchair and fumbling for yet another cigarette.

"After that I think I shall resign," Chambord said savagely, and went out.

"I'd better call Hank's hounds off the scent," Brian said, crossing to the phone. I nodded. I'd been meaning to suggest it, and I didn't have the energy left to do it myself.

Eight a.m. was just about the right time for the release, I figured. Reaction was apt to be strongest in this hemisphere. The morning papers would have gone out and been read; the noons and evenings would carry it, of course, but the facts would now trickle into the public consciousness; hints would have prepared the great majority before they got it straight either on leaving work or arriving home and seeing a bulletin on TV. In Western Europe, where reaction was likely to be next strongest, it would hit in the early afternoon, and would again be tempered by reaching the public mind in installments before the following day's papers gave the complete "facts". The reaction in China and Russia was all that gave me serious pause.

I closed my eyes, but despite my extreme tiredness I had no urge towards sleep. Across the room I could hear Brian asking our New York office for Sandler or whoever was in charge; the voice which answered wasn't Sandler's, but I didn't look to see the face on the screen.

"Release at eight a.m. your time?" the voice said. "But—hell, all but one of the morning editions will be printed and wrapped by then!"

"Tell Hank this is what we get for being pushful," Brian said in a dispirited tone. "He gave me this ultimatum last night, and I acted on it. So we get the release at eight a.m. and a bond of secrecy until then."

"I've half a mind to rout out Hank and have him draft that thing he was planning to do tomorrow! Then we could get the demand for the release on the wire ahead of the release. Be good prestige-wise!"

"For nothing else, though," Brian said stonily. "They'd jump to the conclusion that I put you up to it, and Solar's

press facilities on UN projects would be up the spout. Henri Chambord is in charge down here—ever heard of him?"

"Heard of him? Are you kidding? Yeah, you're dead right. He's the sort of guy who would put Solar on the excluded list. Can you at least get Kaye on the job? Then maybe tomorrow's morning editions will carry our version instead of the plain official handout."

"Sure," Brian said, and wiped his face before breaking the connection.

A thought struck me, which would have occurred much earlier if I hadn't been two years out of touch. I said, "Brian, when was the last time a news service put something on the wire in its own name? I mean, Hank didn't say we had to find someone to demand more news about the ship—he said we were to put out our own reasons. If I remember you correctly."

"The question's academic," Brian said. "But in fact he was going to use your name as a peg—I was supposed to talk you into it. It would have gone out as a straight release, not a Solar feature, licensed for unlimited rewriting."

"Hank's a clever bastard," I said. I stubbed my cigarette and got up. "Well, that's that."

"No, it's not." Brian swivelled around on the stool by the phone. "I took on a job, remember? I propose to start right now. I want the full details, as full as you can make them, about your encounter with your brother the day of *Starventure*'s return."

Slowly I returned to the chair I'd just left. I said, "I wish to God you'd mentioned the other stories you'd heard. Then I'd have taken my own experience a bit more seriously."

"As of now, you take it seriously." Brian took out his recorder, checked that there was a fresh crystal in place, and set it going.

It was almost eight when I got back to my hotel. I got all the available papers and took them up to my room; while I was filling a tub to soak away some of my exhaustion, I leafed through them. The two big stories of the day were

connected. I knew that now. I wondered how many people were making the connection by guesswork.

Some amateur radio-astronomers, doing daytime work on meteor reflections, had found monsters behind the blue sky, and one of the papers had a confirmatory report from Professor Acosta—a grudging admission that some peculiar phenomena of the sort had been observed.

And in Jakarta the parents of one of the *Starventure's* engineers had been provoked into making accusations of deception against the officials of the starflight project. There was a four-column picture in most of the papers, showing a very handsome middle-aged woman weeping over a posy of flowers.

Scowling, I turned off the tub and went to the phone. I called Carmen's family's number, which I still had from my previous visits to Quito. I got her mother on the line. She spoke no English, and her Spanish was as handicapped by her Indian accent and vocabulary as mine was by sheer lack of fluency, but I managed to learn that Carmen had indeed spent the night there and also that she had gone out half an hour ago. Off to work, presumably. I thanked Sra. Iglesias and tried the office number, but got no reply. It was barely eight, and presumably the staff wasn't in yet. I decided to try again at half past.

Taking the papers, I went and got in the bath.

Wondering who it was who had managed to break down Acosta's previous reticence, I checked that story again. One of Manuel Segura's people had the byline. Good; that meant Solar had the North American rights to the item if they wanted it.

I threw aside the papers and lay staring through the steamy air at nothing in particular. Thinking of Manuel had reminded me that I was supposed to plant a cover story for my absence in space, and might conveniently leave it with him. And from there my mind had suddenly leapt to the impending reality of that trip.

Now I was beginning to get a little of the feeling Carmen must have endured. I whispered under my breath, trying to make facts become real by putting them into words.

"Listen! Today, or more likely tomorrow, they're going to take you down to the spaceport and load you on an orbital ferry and fly you out to *Starventure*. And there they are going to show you a—a creature, a half-shapeless thing with metallic eyes and many limbs, which they will say is Leon. *How* can it possibly be Leon?"

I'd been in space a couple of times before—that didn't bother me. But the thought of what was promised to me out there brought back visions from the past. By the time I was old enough to take notice, the Mars flight was a routine matter and there were permanent colonists on the Moon. I was vaguely aware, though, that in the early days of spaceflight some people had seriously feared the consequences—whether for the comparatively rational reason that Mars might be inhabited by dangerous creatures, or because they regarded trespassing outside the atmosphere as impious.

Well, here were the monsters with a vengeance.

I couldn't remember when in all my life before I'd felt so thoroughly frightened.

The phone went. I started, making the water in the tub slop back and forth with little waves that splashed on my chest. I'd forgotten to do the sensible thing and switch it through to the sound-only circuit serving the bathroom. For a minute I was inclined to let it ring; then I thought that maybe it was Carmen calling me, and climbed out of the water.

Swathed in towels, leaving wet footprints on the carpet, I answered it. It wasn't Carmen. A uniformed man showed on the screen.

"Mr. Drummond?"

"Yes," I said. "What is it?"

"General Suvorov for you. Hold the connection."

The screen blanked; then the image re-formed, catching Suvorov reaching to the switch on his desk with one hand, passing the fingers of the other tiredly through his hair.

"Good morning, Mr. Drummond," he said. "We owe you our congratulations—you and Mr. Watchett. We shall elaborate on your cover story, but there is no doubt it will succeed."

"Chambord said right away he didn't believe a word of it," I muttered. "How long it'll stand up is anybody's guess."

"We have a breathing space, anyway," Suvorov said. "So I will fill my half of the bargain. Not only because I said I would, but because it will be of interest to our psychologists to study the reaction both of yourself to your brother in his—uh—his new shape, and of your brother himself."

I said nothing. The water drying on my skin was chilling me despite the heating in the room.

"We have an orbital shot scheduled for 1650 hours this afternoon—ten minutes to five p.m. Please report to the spaceport at noon for a medical examination and to be fitted with a spacesuit. Have you flown space before?"

I must have gaped; fortunately it wasn't time for a picture-melt and Suvorov didn't see me. Either he had been pulling strings very hard, or the psychologists were eager for these data he'd spoken of.

Swallowing, I contrived to answer. "Yes, I've flown space a couple of times. No further than orbit, though."

"That's all you'll be doing this time. I've made no arrangements for Miss Iglesias, by the way—she didn't look to me as though she could stand the shock of such an experience."

"I—I don't think she would want to go," I agreed.

The picture-melt caught me with a dispirited expression on my face. Suvorov, frozen in a frown, commented.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" he rapped.

"No."

"Then you'd better take an hour's forced-sleep this morning. Otherwise the medics will probably veto your flight. Have you arranged this excuse for your absence that you were talking about?"

"Not yet. I can probably fix it by making a couple of phone calls. I forgot to ask how long I was likely to be away."

"Twenty-four hours, not longer."

"All right. Shall I make my own way to the port, or would you prefer to send a staff car for me?"

"I'll have a car waiting for you at 1130 hours."

When he had broken the connection, I went back in the

bathroom and let the water out of the tub. Dried, I put on clean clothes and returned to the phone. First I ordered breakfast and asked for someone to be sent to a drugstore to get me the forced-sleep capsules Suvorov had recommended. Then I called Manuel Segura.

After congratulating him on getting one of his men past Acosta's screen of reticence, I mentioned casually that—after the morning news-release—it didn't look as though there would be any further developments on that front for a day or two, so I had the idea in mind that I might check up on the sky-monster sightings in Chile which started the whole panic. I was fairly sure by the time I'd finished that, without my having positively said so, he would expect me to disappear down to Chile for at least a day and possibly longer. I could rely on Brian to reinforce the impression.

And now, surely, Carmen must have got to her office. I called that number.

A pretty receptionist answered me. No, Señorita Iglesias had not come in this morning. No, she had not called to say she was unwell or anything like that. She had simply not put in an appearance. They had called her home to inquire, but her mother knew nothing about her movements and had been surprised to learn she wasn't at work. Was there any message?

Dismayed, I mumbled something and rang off.

XII

WHAT HAD THAT crazy girl taken it into her head to do now?

I'd always pictured Carmen as being one of the most level-headed and self-possessed people I knew. But it was clear I didn't really know her. In fact, I'd said something of the kind to her already. She had seemed to me to look on life from a

refreshingly cynical viewpoint—not unpleasantly cynical, just wry and detached.

What had happened to her brother had stripped away the mask and laid bare beneath something archetypally older. She had talked seriously of second-sight because she was the seventh child of a seventh child. I'd dismissed it as one of her poses designed to startle people. And—if circumstances had been different—I'd have gone on assuming that.

Now, having had my own nice tidy scientific world-picture blown to smithereens, I was even beginning to wonder how much of a joke it had been when she talked of her ancestry being one-quarter jaguar.

I spent a few terrifying minutes thinking about the changes that were going to take place in the world I'd known. Always I'd believed that we were making some kind of progress—that we were ridding ourselves of an ancient burden when we replaced superstition and dogma with reason and fact. I remembered the ringing phrases I'd used to describe *Starventure*'s return—something about "man throwing down his challenge to the stars"—and I shivered.

The challenge had been taken up with enthusiasm, and I could foresee nothing better coming of it than the collapse of all our pride.

I'd shared that pride. Somewhere in the back of my mind, and I imagined in the minds of people of this twenty-first century, there had been a vision of Man encompassing the universe by the power of his intelligence. That was the dream which had inspired *Starventure*.

Had we been deluding ourselves? Had we truly been misled into thinking that because we seemed to understand our own little corner of the cosmos we were on the way to understanding the whole of it?

Suppose that our "laws of nature" were mere anomalies! Suppose that our planet Earth was a statistical variation, and the rest of the universe operated on totally different principles!

My imagination was being drawn irresistibly down such paths as these, leading to who could tell what appalling conclusions, when I was prosaically interrupted by the ar-

rival of the breakfast I had ordered, and the capsules of forced-sleep drug.

Inexpressibly glad of the distraction, I tipped the girl who had brought it with absurd generosity. I poured a full cup of scalding black coffee, gulped it down, and followed it with another. My raging thoughts began to stabilise. I told myself that it wasn't good speculating about the future—I'd had most of my evidence reduced to nonsense. I would be far better advised to wait until I'd satisfied myself that Leon was really and truly in this monstrous form he was alleged to have acquired. I wasn't looking forward to the experience, but honesty drove me to impatience.

Meantime . . . Carmen.

There wasn't anything I could do. In the two and a half hours remaining before the staff car sent by Suvorov came to fetch me to the spaceport, I had to get at least the hour of forced-sleep he'd insisted on. I *dared* not lose the opportunity of going up to *Starventure*. The space-service medics would almost certainly refuse to allow me aboard the ferry if I was dropping with weariness; I had previous knowledge of the thoroughness with which they screened their passengers. And in any case it would be unfair to the psychologists who hoped to gain some sort of fresh clue from watching me and—and Leon when we met.

(Crazy, this mental hiatus which occurred every time I tried to sneak up on the notion that that thing there, in the many-legged body, was a variant form of my brother!)

I considered asking Brian to trace her, on the excuse that he would want to obtain further details of her supposed vision—or whatever you'd call it—of Hermanos. But I had no idea where Brian might be at the moment; I was sure he was taking his new task seriously, because he had grilled me at Chambord's. He might be at the spaceport, perhaps, or at the press office, but the odds were that he had already gone to see the first of the people from whom he had heard rumours about the appearance of *Starventure*'s crew in Quito.

Logically, I comforted myself, he would be looking for Carmen anyway. And it might be better if he found her

without my prompting. Last night she had said to me, "You don't own me."

Which had suddenly made it clear that I wanted to. The next thing I intended to say to Señorita Carmen Iglesias was: "Will you marry me?" In the terrible new universe I saw looming before me I desperately wanted to have and keep a woman who was not—as she was not—utterly committed to the falsehoods and errors of outmoded "reality".

Suppose an ant, immensely proud of her race's vast public works, mastery of building techniques and the arts of farming and domesticating other insects, were suddenly to become aware of the existence of man: she would feel very much as I felt right now.

I had been picking at my breakfast while thinking along these lines. Abruptly I could endure it no longer. I pushed back my plate, picked up the forced-sleep capsules, and went to fetch a glass of water to wash them down.

In forced-sleep, at least there could be no dreams.

It had struck me belatedly that to leave my hotel in broad daylight in a UN car was apt to wreck my chances of persuading people I'd gone down to Chile for a day or two. Fortunately the same point must have occurred to Suvorov; the car he sent had no insignia and the driver wasn't wearing uniform. He was a taciturn local man whose Indian ancestry had formed his long solemn face.

It was already possible to sense the effect of the release about *Starventure* this morning. There was an indefinable aura of gloom over the city. The municipal banners were still up in the streets, against the time of the heroes' welcome which had been planned for the crew, but people were avoiding looking at them. And at the point where the road to the spaceport branched off the highway, there was something new: a police checkpoint at which five or six cars were lined up while their drivers expostulated with the officials in charge. My driver flashed an authorisation card, and we were let through, the target of curious stares. I kept my head down, and hoped no one would recognise me.

Either Suvorov hadn't found the hour for a dose of forced-

sleep, or he'd taken the stuff three days running and passed the point at which it remained effective. I suspected the latter, because last night he had complained to Brandt about the noise we were making; on the fourth day you're supposed to have twelve hours' natural sleep to catch up, and he had obviously not managed it.

I wasn't taken to his office, but to a conference room in the same block. There were about a dozen people present altogether, including Suvorov, whose ghastly drawn face was the first thing to impress me. Next to him was Cassiano, a plump sallow Italian with a small moustache and Imperial beard; he was the man in overall command, and I'd met him a couple of times during the launch preparations two years ago. I also recognised Lenister and a woman called Doris Quantrell whom I'd once interviewed at Columbia when I was doing a book on recent developments in psychobiology. There was a man in space-service uniform with the caduceus collar-tabs of the medical branch, the woman whose conference Suvorov had interrupted for us last night, and some others.

I had the immediate feeling that I'd interrupted a fierce argument. Cassiano's words confirmed it.

"Ah—Mr. Drummond! We've met before, I believe. Take the chair at the end of the table, will you? We were just discussing the matter of this—uh—invitation which General Suvorov extended to you."

I sat down, looking from face to face around the long table which extended down the middle of the oblong room. I had a pretty clear idea who was raising objections.

"Correction," I said. "The suggestion was mine, and I made it the price of co-operation in concealing the actual facts of what's happened aboard *Starventure.*"

Doris Quantrell stiffened and threw a venomous glare at Suvorov. He didn't notice. I imagined he was having to concentrate exclusively on keeping awake.

"General Cassiano!" she snapped. "We'd already agreed that this was going to be kept *secret!* It wasn't to be revealed to the crew's families, even—least of all to a man who is also a reporter!"

"Doris, I've told you before," Lenister cut in. "It isn't enough to keep our mouths shut. For at least the past couple of days people have been voicing suspicions. We were damned lucky that Drummond was available to help out. He's not *just* Leon Drummond's brother, and he's not *just* a reporter—he's won the Kalinga Prinze for science-writing, and he has a reputation which will help to stop the public falling for the wild rumours going around."

"That much is incontestable," Cassiano said. "Dr. Quantrell, I must request you to base your future objections on some other grounds. While you're thinking them over, let's hear from you, Major Kamensky."

The man with the caduceus collar-tabs turned his eyes on me. He said, "Flown space before, Mr. Drummond?"

"I have about a hundred hours' space experience on two occasions," I said. "The first time was about five years ago, just after my brother was engaged to work on *Starventure;* the second was three years back, during the hull-assembly job. I was on assignment for my former employers, Solar Press."

"And since then you've had no diseases or other physical trouble which might prevent you being passed for orbital flight?"

"None that I'm aware of."

Kamensky glanced at Cassiano. "In that case, I have no objection—mark you, I reserve the right to change my mind after a proper examination of Mr. Drummond, but I've no objection in principle."

"Good enough." Cassiano shifted in his chair. "Dr. Lenister, you're most strongly in favour, I gather."

"Definitely," Lenister said. "I don't know what's got into Doris. If I hadn't been so desperately preoccupied with my own work, I'd have insisted much earlier on the need for a good convincing lie to the public. Frankly, I think our entire public relations department must have been in a state of shock. I'm delighted with the ingenious cover-story Drummond and his colleague developed for us. I've been having nightmares about the strain of trying to work with a frightened and suspicious public clamoring at the door."

"Come to the point!" snapped Dr. Quantrell. "You still haven't given us a reason why Suvorov's unauthorised action should be approved."

Cassiano made to say something, but changed his mind and let Lenister answer direct.

"You just haven't been listening, then, Doris—that's all I can say. *I want data*—I want information about the form the personality of these poor bloody crewmen has taken in their lunatic new shapes. Drummond here is the only close relative of any of the crewmen who has the kind of scientific background I believe to be necessary. I want to study the emotional reaction of Leon Drummond to a confrontation with his brother."

"You want! You want!" Dr. Quantrell said scornfully. "So I'll tell you what *I* want! I want you to get rid of this absurd bee in your bonnet about 'transfer of personality into another bodily form'—do I quote you correctly, *Doctor* Lenister? I want us to do something practical and constructive to protect ourselves against the alien monsters which are trying to use the blockheadedness of people like you as a Trojan horse for their entry to Earth!"

So that was what the real argument was about. Not about me at all, nor about Suvorov's "unauthorised action". A chill of terror passed down my spine.

XIII

SUDDENLY LENISTER was choking with fury. His face turned beet-red, and he clamped his hands on the edge of the table so violently that I had wild visions of him breaking pieces out of the wood and crushing them to dust. For several seconds he was unable to speak. Then he forced out words aimed at Cassiano like bullets from a gun.

"Get rid of this god-damned woman! Get her off this project before I break her arrogant neck! She's so stuffed with preconceptions she'll do anything she can to wreck other people's work! How the hell do you expect us to get any valid information out of Drummond when she's deliberately setting out to bias his mind? I can't stand it a moment longer—I'm getting the hell out!"

He jumped to his feet so quickly that his chair overturned and crashed on the floor behind him, stormed towards the door, ignoring the attempts of Kamensky and others to catch his attention, and went out cursing in a horrible subdued monotone.

There was a frozen pause. Everyone looked at Cassiano, on whose olive-sallow face beads of perspiration were standing out.

"I'm going to recess this conference for an hour," he said at last. "Dr. Quantrell, your behaviour is inexcusable. Major Kamensky, you are going to administer to both Dr. Quantrell and Dr. Lenister such tranquillising drugs as you consider will restore them to a rational state—be quiet, Dr. Quantrell!" he added more sharply as he saw her start to frame objections. "I am making this a condition of your remaining here. I am *sick* of your personal wrangling with Lenister! I am also sick of your childish insistence on getting your own way because of your sex."

It was Dr. Quantrell's turn to jump to her feet and march out. Nobody tried to stop her. There was another interval of silence. I looked at Suvorov; he had leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, and I judged that his exhaustion had finally caught up with him.

I couldn't find it in myself to be surprised at the scene I had just witnessed. I'd had a dose of the emotional strain these people must be undergoing in my hotel room this morning. After a solid week, it was to be expected that cracks would show.

The woman on whose meeting Suvorov had burst in last night, who was sitting on Kamensky's left and had not spoken since I came in, now stirred and made to catch Cassiano's eye. He said, "Yes, Miss Tobolkin?"

Automatically my memory glossed the name: Tatiana Tobolkin, Institute of Areobotany—that incredible place in Siberia where they had duplicated forty square miles of the surface of Mars so that Martian vegetation could be studied more conveniently. I'd always meant to visit it, and somehow never manged the time.

"I am opposed to any recess," Miss Tobolkin said in strongly accented English. "What has happened has probably made the original idea absurd. As I understand it, the intention was to find out whether Dr. Quantrell's opinion was spontaneously shared by Mr. Drummond and so determine whether we do in fact have the transfer of personality for which Dr. Lenister had so strongly argued, or whether we have some hostile creatures. We must make a decision in principle at once, and I wish to state that despite what has happened the proposed confrontation is still in my view necessary. If Mr. Drummond would now be prejudiced, then we must invite some other close relative of the crew with a sufficiently resilient personality to accept the shock."

"Vote," Cassiano said. "Miss Tobolkin is opposed to recess. Those who agree with Miss Tobolkin, please."

Suvorov moved to put his right elbow on the table and raise his hand. He barely blinked his eyes open. After a moment of hesitation Kamensky copied him, and so did all but two of the others.

"Very well," Cassiano said. "We make our decision now, despite the absence of Doctors Quantrell and Lenister."

"Oughtn't we to hear Mr. Drummond's view?" Suvorov said in a hoarse voice. "At least he comes fresh to the problem. He may have a useful point to make."

"Agreed. Mr. Drummond, have you made sense out of what's happened here since you came in?"

I cleared my throat. The chill of terror was still upon me; I felt like a corpse.

"One thing is clear enough," I said. "In Dr. Lenister's opinion, the forms of the crew have somehow been changed, but the personalities are there and are genuine. So far, his arguments have prevailed and you're acting on that assumption even though there's no known way in which this phenomenon

could have been brought about. I imagine you have internal evidence which supports him. I was told this last night, and the shock numbed me to the point at which I failed to question the idea. Right now, it seems to me just as reasonable to go along with Dr. Quantrell."

"You're assuming in that case that the responsible aliens have so deep an understanding of human psychology that they can adopt individual personality traits." Suvorov had opened his eyes again and was staring at me. "It's inconsistent to follow through by arguing that they would then present themselves to us in their own bodies."

"That's Lenister's strongest point," Cassiano said. "We've already tackled it. Making allowances for the difficulty of communication, the psychologists who prepared the datasheets on the crew before their departure have been driven to the belief that there has been a real continuity of personality."

I shook my head. "This is unprecedented," I muttered, "so I don't want to make up my mind. Could I just ask one or two more questions?"

"One or two!" Cassiano snorted. "You're very considerate, Mr. Drummond. If I were you, I'd want to put one or two thousand questions!" He settled more comfortably in his chair and made a gesture inviting me to go ahead.

"What's supposed to be the purpose of the—the aliens in making this exchange of bodies if they in fact did so?"

The man facing Kamensky, a lean type with a lantern jaw, indicated his willingness to reply.

"I'm Joost van Camp, Mr. Drummond—University of Leyden. I don't believe we've met. Uh—" He hesitated. "Well, at present we're considering the suggestion that the rumours of mysterious appearances by the starship crew are founded on fact. We further tentatively assume that the aliens have not known about us before, and have as it were borrowed outward forms in which they can visit our planet and investigate us unchallenged."

"Are you assuming that they're benevolent?" I asked.

He looked uneasy. "Not necessarily," he said at length. "It might appear so if they have provided as it were alternative

homes for the—uh—the minds of the crewmen while their bodies are being—uh—borrowed. But on the other hand it may be simple caution, an insurance against our proving to be equally strong, equally capable with them."

Miss Tobolkin leaned forward. "Of course, we have so little evidence to guide us—we know only Terran and Martian biology as yet—but it appears that there are some artificial traits in these loaned bodies."

I gave her an astonished look. "For instance?"

"You know, I imagine, that these creatures aboard *Starventure* breathe oxygen and exhale CO_2, can eat normal human food and drink water and other liquids we drink. But the chemical composition of the protoplasm does not suggest an origin on a world at all resembling Earth. Nor Mars, come to that. The proportion of water in the tissues, the distribution of the elements which contribute to the carbon-based—but peculiar—substances we have so far analysed: these are indicative of a deliberate modification from a very different starting-point."

"Even more crucial," put in van Camp, "is the absence of a reproductive system."

Miss Tobolkin gave a vigorous nod of agreement.

I considered that for a few moments before speaking again.

"Mr. van Camp," I said finally, "are you taking it for granted that there are alien minds in the crew's bodies, and that these bodies have somehow been brought down to Earth and are going around with their alien occupants studying us?"

"We're taking nothing for granted," he answered in an unhappy voice. "But it makes as much sense as any other idea."

"Is there any possible connection between the crew's various landings in the Alpha Centauri system, and these events?"

"No." Miss Tobolkin gave the word great emphasis. "Not unless the entire records aboard the ship have been falsified. Landings were made on two small planets and a number of moons, and these were found to be barren. One of the planets will probably develop life in another million years—it has large pools of oily carbon-based compounds—but there is rather little water and no free oxygen."

"Then—" I hesitated, made up my mind and took the plunge. "Then are these creatures inhabitants of a hyperspatial universe?"

"We are arguing," van Camp said. "It has been suggested—I don't pretend to follow the reasoning because it's outside my field, but there are mathematical demonstrations. Our space may prove to be a local variant of a greater space."

I thought of my depressing speculations a few hours ago. It was paradoxically comforting to realise I wasn't the only person to entertain such suspicions.

"Are they supposed to be looking out of their—their own universe into ours?" I licked my lips. My mouth was dry.

"You refer to the apparitions in the sky?" van Camp countered. On my nod he shrugged and spread his hands.

"How big are the ones in *Starventure?*"

"About the mass of a man," Miss Tobolkin said crisply. I gave a wry grin dictated by relief. It had only been in the instant before I put the question that the point struck me.

During the past few exchanges Cassiano had been showing signs of mounting impatience. Now he rapped the table and addressed me.

"Mr. Drummond, you will be more fully informed later. At present we're concerned only to arrive at our decision. Let me put the matter squarely to you. Are you willing to act as a guineapig and confront the creature we suspect of being your brother Leon? And do you think you will be able to retain a sufficiently open mind to help us determine the creature's actual nature?"

"The first answer is yes," I said as steadily as I could. "But it'd be dishonest if I tried to answer the second question before the—the confronation."

Cassiano gave a grunt and looked around the table. "At present," he reminded his audience, "we are able to act on our own discretion. It's possible that this state of affairs won't last. Before asking you for your recommendation, I want you to envisage the risk of having to justify it later on—for example, to a committee of inquiry of the United Nations."

He paused, to let it sink in.

"Very well, then! Those in favour of confirming General Suvorov's proposal."

One by one, all their hands went up.

"Good, thank you. Would you go with Major Kamensky, Mr. Drummond? We have only one orbital flight scheduled today—at 1650 hours—and it will be necessary to complete your medical check and kitting-out by 1500 hours at latest."

Except for Suvorov, who was slumped in his chair and had apparently given up his struggle to stay awake, the others were rising to their feet with expressions of relief.

"And—good luck!" Cassiano said. "If that means anything any more."

I nodded and made blindly for the door. I was trying to decide which would be worse: to find my brother trapped in a monster's body, or a monster masquerading as my brother.

I was having no success at all.

XIV

THEY'D DEVELOPED some new wrinkles since I last went through a pre-space medicheck. The sugar-booster injection into the liver no longer left behind a feeling like a day-old bruise, and that was good, but they were giving the de-celerine-cum-antinausea shot—all three c.c.'s of it—into the gluteus maximus instead of intravenously, and that was bad. Kamensky knew it, and apologised, saying something about slower diffusion being required with the new longer-burning ferry-fuels.

Otherwise the process was fairly familiar. Apart from having been through it twice before myself, I'd watched it on a dozen occasions and written it up nearly as often. Kamensky's staff were a very smooth-working team.

At first they were dubious when I was presented to them—I imagined they'd had problems lately with some of the scientific high brass they'd had to prepare for a visit to *Starventure*. They relaxed when they realised I knew what they were doing, and even managed to crack a few sick jokes for me.

"I wish our other special visitors posed as few special difficulties as you, Mr. Drummond," Kamensky said as he read the final report. "Your vitamin B12 is down a little, so you'd better take a supply orally, but that's the only extra item on the routine list. How about food? Can you take a pre-space dry meal, or would you rather have an extra glucose shot and wait till you're in orbit before you eat again?"

"No, I've had dry meals on the previous occasions."

"More than I can manage," Kamensky grunted. "To me they taste like compressed sawdust. But it's certainly better to go up with your guts working on something. Okay, you can go for kitting-out now. Don't drink anything before take-off, will you? If the dry meal is too much for you, suck a one-c.c. lump of ice. And you know about emptying your bladder and bowels before strap-down. That's the lot, then."

He got up and reached across his desk.

"I'll repeat what General Cassiano said—good luck. But I share his opinion that it probably doesn't mean anything any more."

Medically inspected—kitted-out—fed, I emerged into the pre-space briefing room. I'd had to take the ice after the dry meal, and it had started an ache in one of my molars which I hoped very much wasn't going to call for attention by Kamensky at this stage.

The room was dominated by a huge internally-illuminated orrery showing the Earth, the Moon and everything in orbit around those two bodies. Over the course of the past half-century the number had reached a respectable total. At present the mechanism was set to show apparent rotation from a fixed point—from *Starventure* herself, presumably.

A group of three men were standing before the airtight case talking in low terms. Cassiano was in the middle; on

his right was a stranger in well-worn spacekit who barely came to his elbow—a pilot, I guessed. And on his left, his attitude morose, was Lenister.

They turned at my approach. I saw the pilot's face for the first time, and checked in mid-stride. The face was Chinese or Japanese, finely-formed with large luminous eyes; it wasn't that which had startled me, but the red of the lips. I was perfectly aware that several women had been trained to fly space, but this was the first time I'd encountered a woman pilot in context, so to speak.

Cassiano greeted me and presented me to the pilot; her name was Becky Koo. She put out her hand and shook with a firm grip.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Drummond," she said in excellent English. "I rely on your books to keep me in touch with the fields I don't have time to study properly."

I muttered a word of thanks and something about being flattered.

"Hadn't you better get kitted-up?" Cassiano added to Lenister. "It's nearly fifteen hundred now."

"I guess so," Lenister agreed. "I'll be as quick as I can."

He moved off across the room. I asked a wondering question of Cassiano with my eyes, and he shrugged.

"He has insisted," he said. "There's no medical reason why not, for Kamensky checked him the day before yesterday. That flight aborted—we had to send up some urgent equipment in his place. I feel he may calm down if he has seen for himself."

"Who have you actually got up there?" I demanded. "I know who's been here, to the port—they read like a 'Who's Who in Modern Science'—but I imagine a lot have failed the medicheck."

"Yes, that's one of our worst difficulties." Cassiano wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "After what's happened, we can call on the world's finest minds, but so many of them are elderly now. Dr. Tobolkin wants to go up, and I'd like her to, but she has a weak heart, and Dr. van Camp has a psychological handicap—acute vertigo or something of the sort. So they stay down here and process data for us.

Out at the ship, we have all our own consultants who are fit to fly space, with the psychologists working under Graubmayer and Sico and the physiologists and so on working under Rokossovsky."

Nobel Prize in Medicine two years ago, I recalled. I'd known that all three were in Quito; they were among the people I'd tried to locate several times this past week.

"Is everyone else still at the port who's come here since *Starventure*'s return?"

"Pretty well," Cassiano grunted. "You couldn't say we lack talent for the job. But a more temperamental, argumentative, pig-headed bunch you couldn't find anywhere!"

An hour before lift-off, we walked out across the concrete of the port to the waiting ferry. Walked, because someone had overlooked the routine re-charging of the batteries on the little electric trolley which normally would have carried us from the briefing room. I didn't mind; in fact, I found I preferred it. Becky Koo went a little ahead of Lenister and myself, humming a curious Asiatic melody.

"How do you feel, Drummond?" Lenister muttered to me after we had gone about half the distance.

"Not too bad," I said. "You?"

"Terrible." He gave a harsh chuckle. "I was just wishing I had the guts to turn around and walk right back indoors. Flown space before? Oh yes, of course you have—you said you had a hundred hours in orbit already."

I nodded.

"You look calm enough, I must say," he went on. "And here I am with butterflies breeding in my guts in spite of the gallons of tranquilliser Kamensky gave me. Let me make a guess at what's keeping you going. You don't really believe what you're going to see, do you? At the back of your mind you're kidding yourself that you'll find your brother looking and acting like himself."

"I guess I haven't really accepted it emotionally," I conceded.

"Me, though—I've been on it for a week, nearly. I've had to listen to Graubmayer on the maseradio, reciting these

fantastic accounts of what he's found up there . . . You know how he talks? In a sort of thick voice like porridge?"

"I've heard him at congresses a few times. I know what you mean."

"Well, all this has pushed me to the point where I'm afraid what I see will be worse than what I'm picturing to myself." Lenister chuckled again, with nervousness this time. "I'd like to ask your opinion, but after the way I screamed at Doris Quantrell for biasing you ahead of time I don't have the face to. Have you run across her before?"

"Yes. I interviewed her for one of my books."

"I hadn't met her. I've been at the Sorbonne for several years, and she's come up since I left the States. I find her absolutely insufferable. I'm not usually anti-feminist, but I even dislike the idea of flying with a woman pilot after what Doris has done to me."

"Has she tried to get up to *Starventure?*"

"Yes. But Kamensky vetoed the application, thank God. He wasn't going to tell her why, but she insisted, and finally he lost his temper and spat it out. He said she was a potential hysteric and he wasn't going to answer for it if she was allowed aboard a spaceship. It was because Kamensky then proceeded to pass me as fit that she took this violent dislike to me."

I nodded, but didn't answer. I was suddenly preoccupied by the terrifying vision of all the petty personal feuds and irritations which stood between us and a chance of tackling our problem on a rational footing.

The ground-crew had finished loading the crates of equipment which formed the ferry's freight this time. Now their balloon-tyred vehicles were backing away from the sleek Wallis-winged form of the ship, and the crew escalator was being eased towards the airlock. I tried to distract myself by noting the minor design-improvements since I was last so close to a space-ferry, two years ago.

Like all the ferries operating out of Quito—and indeed most of those in service anywhere on Earth—this was an RRR ship: rocket-ramjet-rocket. The nose, now, was pointed

at seventy degrees above the horizontal, and the longitudinal axis was aligned parallel to the Equator. The tubby shapes of the kickpots stuck out like coke-bottles either side of the tail. In one flaming burst they would hurl the ship through the dense lower layers of the atmosphere. At ninety thousand feet, with Mach 6 showing on the instrument board, they would burn out and detach themselves; they would fall thirty thousand feet and then a thermite charge would ignite and ensure that they never returned to Earth's surface. Meantime, the single huge ramjet around which the hull of the ship was assembled would come into operation—the nosecone would be blown off, to suffer the same fate as the kickpots, the variable-configuration wings would be extended, and in two screaming circuits of the planet they would carry the ship through another hundred thousand feet and a further twelve Mach numbers. At Mach 18 the air would be too thin for the ramjet, and the pure rockets would take us up to *Starventure*.

"You know, I didn't realise these things were so big!" Lenister muttered as we paused to await the okay signal from the man driving the escalator into position.

"This is the S-class ferry," I said. "Measures about two hundred and seventy feet overall. Weighs about a thousand tons without the kickpots."

"Fantastic." He stared up, craning his neck, towards the distant nosecone.

Normally, I was as capable of being impressed by our technical ingenuity as the next man—maybe more so, because it was part of my stock in trade. I had to feel excitement before I could communicate it on paper. But right now . . .

"How do they land them, for pity's sake? I've been here a week and I've never had time to watch it done!"

"I'm sorry—what?" I hadn't quite caught Lenister's question. He repeated it.

"Oh—it's got Wallis wings. Variable configuration. It glides back down, losing speed against the rotation of the Earth, makes its approach at about four hundred miles an hour. Then it gets a signal from the ground which fires the

forward rockets—you can just see the nozzles, but they've got fairings over them for the outward trip—and the same signal triggers the wings into the drag position. It has to be done automatically because the exhaust from the forward rockets completely covers the ship; all you can see is a red-hot cloud of gas diving on to the port. It touches down on retractable skids at about a hundred and twenty and brakes to a dead stop in less than a mile."

"Sounds uncomfortable." He tried a smile. It was ghastly.

"It isn't too bad. Get a pilot who sets up a really accurate approach, and the ship touches down as smoothly as a civil airliner."

"Well, I'll be damned." Lenister's eyes had wandered back to the dominating bulk of the ship. "I didn't know about that. Ingenious, isn't it?"

I finished what I'd been telling myself when he interrupted my train of thought. I'd been reflecting that whereas I was usually enthusiastic about our human cleverness, right now I was apparently faced with creatures who could not only "borrow" human bodies and "lend" others of their own making to the displaced proprietors, but could then place those bodies on Earth's surface zephyr-gently, without benefit of ships, or rockets, or a spaceport like this one.

I recalled my conceited ant, who had just found out about human beings.

XV

ONE THING nobody had told me about was the smell. It hit me the moment I cracked my suit on the in-ship side of *Starventure*'s passenger-lock. It wasn't the submarine staleness of air used and re-used past the ability of the conditioners

to cleanse it, though that was there too. It was an alien smell: a hint of ammonia, of formaldehyde, of oxidised fats, of all and yet none of these.

Lenister, very pale and clinging to the straps on the bulkhead as though afraid to cast off into free fall, noticed it a moment after I did and commented on it.

"Like a zoo!" he said.

That was right. A compound animal smell would about describe it.

"You'll stop smelling it after a while," said the girl who had been waiting to see us through the lock. She looked and sounded African, but she hadn't offered to introduce herself. "Which of you is Dr. Lenister?"

"I am," Lenister said, still clinging with one hand; in the other he clutched his helmet while glancing about him for somewhere to put it.

"Professor Graubmayer asked for you to be brought to him directly on arrival. This way, please."

She eeled through the inner door of the lock with a quick swimming motion and set off along the corridor beyond. As well as we could—I'd never had time to learn the knack of gravity-less running, and Lenister had never attempted it before—we followed her.

There was much of the feel of an ocean liner about *Starventure*. She was enormous compared to any other ship we had ever built; you could have put two of the regular Mars vessels inside the hull and had room for an orbital ferry as well. I'd studied her design pretty closely when writing up the story of her departure for Alpha Centauri, but that wasn't much help—the brief glimpse we'd had while transferring from the ferry hadn't told me which of the four possible locks we were passing through, nor which way her nose was pointed. From the curvature of the corridor I guessed we were heading in the midships direction.

I was wrong.

The door before which the girl brought herself to a stop long enough to activate the lock was labelled FORWARD FERRY HOLD. Beyond, there should have been a huge compartment into which the ferry could be drawn by a set

of hydraulic waldoes. There wasn't. Or rather, the hold was still there, but it had been converted to other uses.

What they had done was to divide up both the ferry holds—the largest empty sections of the ship once the ferries were out—by means of lightweight plastic screens. Into the boxlike rooms so created they had tossed computers, scientific instruments, crates of microfilm and magnatape records, and the investigating staff. It was eerie to see an Elliott Million computer upside-down directly beyond the door, not fastened to a stand but simply tethered, its power-cable looping like a drunken snake across its back.

I heard Lenister gulp as the man working at the computer, hanging head-down relative to us as we entered, glanced around and spoke. It was Graubmayer himself. His voice was indeed like porridge.

"Glad you made it, Lenister. Is that Drummond you have with you? And turn over so I can see who I'm talking to."

The girl pulled back to the wall of the corridor to let us past, then closed the door of the hold and skimmed away out of sight between the screens, back to her own task.

We rolled over to the same attitude as Graubmayer. That was a little better.

"Welcome to aboriginal chaos," he went on with a trace of bitterness. "I'm trying to get a loglan printout of our findings so far about Leon Drummond, but some double-dyed idiot has mislabelled part of the data and I can't locate them in the memory."

"Siegfried!" a shrill voice called from just beyond the nearest screen. "Try punching for continuity of personality—you'll get data on all sixty of the crew, but Drummond's will be separable."

"That's what I'm doing, thanks," Graubmayer called back. "Just waiting for it to print out, that's all."

I saw that a piece of mesh had been put over the delivery vent of the computer to stop the tape flying out and getting tangled. As I glanced towards it, the little red light signifying DATA ORGANISED began to blink, and the tape emerged.

Graubmayer gave a sigh. "We'll get it this way, but it's

a damned nuisance," he grunted. "All right. Now you're Leon Drummond's brother, isn't that right?"

I nodded, and as a result began to rock back and forth in mid-air.

"I heard from the base that you'd offered to co-operate. We're very grateful. I must say I wouldn't care to go through it myself. It's bad enough being slightly acquainted with members of the crew—I knew Chandra Dan, for example. But I've studied your brother's pre-flight psychology charts, and I gather that you and he were even closer than siblings usually are as a result of being orphaned."

"Where—?" My voice failed me; I had to swallow and start again. "Where is he?"

"The crew are living in their own quarters. We've disturbed the routine they established during the trip as little as we possibly could—anything which tends to stabilise the environment helps to normalise their behaviour, as you'll appreciate. So we've merely cleared out the two ferries, which were used as records stores on the return trip anyway—you probably saw them orbiting outside as you came in."

"No," Lenister said. "We didn't see a damned thing." He tried to laugh.

"How soon do I see my brother?" I pressed. Now I was actually here, now the moment was upon me, waiting seemed unendurable.

"As soon as we can arrange it!" Graubmayer snapped, suddenly revealing that he too was being worn out by the strain, as Suvorov was, and Lenister—indeed, everyone concerned.

Lenister cleared his throat. "I think we ought to hurry," he ventured. "We have at most twenty-four hours up here; it may prove necessary to confront Mr. Drummond with his brother two or three times to fill out the picture."

"We're not dragging our feet, Lenister," Graubmayer retorted.

I pulled myself back to the bulkhead and waited with as much patience as I could manage. Listening as Lenister and Graubmayer talked, to each other and to people who ap-

peared from elsewhere in the hold to ask questions or bring new information, I supplemented what I already knew from Suvorov.

The physical change—assuming that was what had happened—might have been earlier than Suvorov had told me The crew had got into the habit of going naked, which was logical; the crew of Mars vessels seldom wore more than trunks. Consequently clothing could not have offered a clue to what had occurred, and it might have been as long as a month before the unfortunates who went to break out spacesuits were suddenly forced into awareness of their plight. A curious blind spot had been created in each mind. That was one of the most amazing aspects of the whole fantastic affair.

Suvorov had said they were no longer equipped for speech in their new bodies. This was not strictly true. Some or all of those bodies were capable of generating and hearing sounds beyond the normal audible range, rather higher than a bat's squeak. Sound-converters had been part of the cargo aboard the ferry which Lenister and I had ridden up. It was hoped to enable conversation by means of them.

That disposed of an inconsistency which had already puzzled me—that some of the crew had attempted to greet the men from the first tug to contact the returned starship It left another: why, if they were able to talk at all, they had continued to transmit code rather than use maseradio when they came in range.

The discussion passed out of my area of comprehension after that. I'd always kept well abreast of the physical sciences, including such disciplines as areobotany, but I was some years behind with the latest developments in psychology—as I already knew from working on the book for which I'd interviewed Doris Quantrell. Here they were talking about Duxman's factor, and the *phi* quotient, and the variation curve of determinant scan—terms of which I had only the haziest notion.

A girl came swimming around the hold with a net bag full of squeezebulbs of lukewarm coffee and gave one to each of us. Rokossovsky came from the after ferry hold where he

was working on the physciological aspects of the problem to discuss a disputed point with Graubmayer; he was told who I was, gave me a nod, and forgot me again. Sico, a lean, handsome Mexican with distinguished grey hair whom I'd met briefly at a congress the way I'd met most of the world's scientific notables, was called to advise on some tactical question regarding my interview with Leon. Gradually ideas crystallised.

At last Graubmayer turned to me and beckoned me over.

"We'll have to hold the interview in one of the ship's public rooms, I'm afraid," he said. "I'd hoped you could go to his cabin so you'd have the additional 'feel' of the surroundings he's created for himself, but there just isn't enough space for our requirements. We shall have four visual recorders going as well as sound recording, and if you've no objection I'll be present visibly, while Lenister and Sico watch over closed-circuit TV. We've installed a comprehensive system of spy-eyes and recorders throughout the crew's quarters as insurance—there is always the risk that our guess is wrong and these are totally alien creatures, so we want to catch a hint if they give themselves away."

I indicated my agreement. "Do we do it now?" I asked. I felt a terrible wavering apprehension.

"We might as well," Lenister shrugged. "Where do you think would be suitable, Graubmayer?"

"It'll have to be the exercise hall," Graubmayer answered. "It's not ideal, but we've used it for most of our physical and psychological tests so far, and that's where the sound-converters have been installed. We hope your brother will be able to speak to you directly, by the way, Mr. Drummond—did you gather that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well, come with me."

There was more waiting to endure in the exercise hall—a bare room with all the bulkheads heavily padded so that free-fall games could be played in it. The exercise equipment on which every crewman was supposed to spend at least fifteen minutes daily to maintain muscle tone had been

cleared away, and technicians were busy with the newly-delivered sound-converters as well as with wide-angle visual recorders and a great deal of other equipment. On seeing Graubmayer, one of the technicians called out, and there was some discussion over a tape-deck, following which a noise like the grunting of a herd of pigs issued from its speaker. I gathered that this was a recording of one of the crew played back at slow speed, and that it confirmed Graubmayer's optimism about talking directly to Leon. At any rate, he rubbed his hands when he turned to me again.

"I'll have your brother sent for now, Mr. Drummond," he said. "I haven't made any particular suggestions about what you should say to him, and I don't propose to. I imagine you know better than anyone else what behaviour on his part and what special reactions will convince you of his identity. Or fail to convince you, naturally."

I felt myself shiver.

"Would you put this on, Mr. Drummond?"

One of the technicians was offering me an earphone on a long elastic flex; I took it, glancing to see what it was connected to, and saw that it ran back to the nearer of the two sound-converters in the hall. I put it on.

"Don't expect to hear his old voice," Graubmayer warned me. "It's extremely unlikely that there will be any resemblance."

"I understand," I said.

"Good. Lenister, will you and Sico go back to the TV monitor? And the rest of you—out, as soon as you're ready."

The hall emptied. Hanging on air, just out of arm's reach of Graubmayer, in a silence dominated by the pounding of my heart, I awaited the arrival of Leon—monster—Drummond.

XVI

PERHAPS, IF I hadn't been so numb with shock when Suvorov showed me that photograph (less than twenty-four hours ago! Was it possible?), I'd have been prepared for my own reaction as the door slid back to reveal what was beyond. But I hadn't studied the picture closely; I'd retained from it only a vague impression of a misshapen horror, and the memory had become muddled with the more vivid image of the monster that had looked down on Quito.

It was the movement that startled me. I hadn't wondered how such a creature would look when it moved. And while that surprise still had a hold on me, I found myself thinking, "Why—it's rather a handsome beast!"

And it was.

Black, with a kind of glistening cobalt sheen which reminded me of the carapace of a tropical beetle, it drew itself through the doorway with rhythmical motions of its many legs. How many? I counted six—again, reminding me of a beetle. But the effect was somehow not insect-like. More, it resembled the gait of a moon-walker, the superbly efficient machines they developed for long-distance transport across the rocky lunar surface. Yes: certainly like a well-designed machine. As the curious form came further into the room, I could see how the limbs were articulated with the body, how their leverage was obtained, how even in the absence of gravity they suggested considerable strength without excessive bulk.

I thought of what Tatiana Tobolkin had said about indications of artificiality in these new bodies the crew seemed to have acquired. If that body was an artefact, the artificer was a genius.

There were eyes, not exactly set on a head—but then, the mass to which the legs were attached wasn't precisely a body, either. One might say "thorax"—but that again referred to insects, and this wasn't an insect. The eyes were different from those in the Quito sky-monster, and I was

somehow taken aback by this. Apart from their colour—a rich bluish-green—they were quite like terrestrial eyes, having black pupils and mobile lids. But peculiar fringes of . . . tendrils, perhaps one might call them, hanging from below the eyes and from the forward edge of each limb concealed many of the surface details. They were soft, and of a lighter colour than the rest.

This creature, with as many legs as an insect, a machine-like rhythm of movement, and some additional quality which was wholly strange to me, checked itself by catching at the edge of the doorway with a hind limb. In my ear, a voice which was not Leon's at all as regards timbre but was entirely his as regards inflection and emphasis, spoke.

"For heaven's sake—Big Brother himself!"

I was so nervous I feared my voice would break, but it held out. I cracked back, almost as though he were visibly my brother, "What in hell have you been doing to yourself? I've never seen you in such lousy shape!"

He kicked free of the doorway and came closer, checking his flight with a precisely-controlled touch on one of the pieces of equipment fastened to the—well, *floor*.

"You must have been warned," he said soberly. "Did they show you pictures?"

I nodded.

"It's the most extraordinary, incredible, impossible thing!" He jerked his front limbs so that the tips clicked together. In a human body, he would have pounded his right fist into his left palm—a habit of Leon's whenever he was worked up about a problem. "You've heard that it was done so cleverly that we didn't even realise it ourselves until the men from the tug came aboard and we had a standard of visual comparison?"

Again I nodded. "You mean it didn't feel different? Does it feel different now?"

"No, not at all—that's the craziest part." The voice in my earphone was earnest, almost pleading. "Look, I have an extra pair of limbs. I'm aware of the fact in here"—he waved a foreleg towards his eyes—"and yet I can't feel a discontinuity between my human body and this one. These

middle limbs"—now he gestured with them—"are either legs or arms according to the needs of the moment, and they blend into my old memories so smoothly that I'm sometimes puzzled, thinking back, to remember that I sometimes had fiddling jobs to do in which the extra hands would have been an advantage. I have to remind myself that there was a time when they weren't there."

He broke off. "Dave, I can recognise your expression. Something's eating you, and I guess I know what it has to be. You aren't satisfied that there's anything in common between this—this *object* in front of you and the Leon you used to know. Am I right?"

"You know you're right," I said.

He made a helpless movement which couldn't be a shrug because he wasn't constructed for shrugging. "I'm not surprised," he said. "Directly after the men from the tug showed up, when we first realised what had happened, some of us went half out of our minds thinking that people would—well, shoot first and ask questions afterwards. I can't say how glad we were when they proved ready to give us the benefit of the doubt. Crying was one of the things left out of these bodies, or we'd have drowned ourselves in a sort of Alice pool from sheer relief."

I glanced at Graubmayer. There was no trace of expression on his granite-calm face.

"You didn't meet, or even see, the—the creatures who were responsible for your changing?" I ventured.

"Not before it happened. Since then, of course, we've seen them several times."

I started. This was something which no one had mentioned to me. "You mean you've seen them in the sky?" I demanded.

"That's right. In a sort of silhouette form, as though they were partly etched against the black of space." He gave a laugh which came very human through the sound-converter. "It's the weirdest feeling to look at them and remember that that's now a picture of *us*."

"Maheel" I said. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw

Graubmayer turn in astonishment. My monster-brother was quicker.

"Ma*hi!*" he exclaimed.

"Ma*ho!*" I capped, and then we continued in chorus.

"Ma-*rump*-si pomadiddle mitkat nitkat heebo ibo wallah-wallah cheesecake!"

A pause; then a chuckle. "Good grief—I'd almost forgotten that. I can't have been more than six when you taught me to recite that bit of nonsense."

"About that," I said carefully. "It was on the swing at the Fairwood house—the one under the apple-tree."

"No, surely not! We didn't have a swing when we lived at Fairwood. We had an apple-tree okay, but it wasn't the one with the swing. That was at Posquahannet—don't you remember, the gulls used to come into the garden when there was a gale out at sea?"

I remembered perfectly well. And the fact that he did too told me not a damned thing.

Almost as though he had read my thoughts, he said with a trace of bitterness, "Not bad, Dave. But it's no real use. I remember everything I remembered in my old body, as far as I and all the psychologists can discover. And it's getting clearer all the time. At first we were pretty mixed up—poor Chandra Dan especially. It was as though he couldn't keep the passage of time under control; he was thinking in instantaneous units, and they had to get him to a computer because they couldn't cope with his reaction times. But he's adjusted along with the rest of us. I was chatting with him only a short while back."

Desperately, I struggled to think of some indisputable proof of his identity. I'd got no further previously than childhood memories; after all, what we think of as a person is the sum of consciously and unconsciously remembered experience. But, as he'd just pointed out, this was inapplicable to him now.

"Ah—tell me something about the trip," I said at random, and felt the germ of a fresh idea sprout from the words. Hastily I added, "Not just the 'we went and took a look and came back' stuff—I've had all that. But how your theories

about the subjective effects of the drive turned out, for example. You were very excited about that when you left."

"Not half as excited as you were about Hermanos Iglesias's sister," he said dryly. "How is she, by the way? Hermanos is one of the worst-affected of the crew, because he has this big thing about family ties. He got pretty homesick, and he's not standing up well to being a prisoner on the ship now the trip is over."

"As far as I know she's all right," I said. But my voice gave me away. He looked at me sharply.

"Does she know too?"

"Yes."

"Poor girl! If she's anything like Hermanos, she's taking it a hell of a sight harder than you've done. When did you last see her?"

"Last night—uh—I mean only about twenty-odd hours ago."

"So you didn't get over her, hey?" He chuckled. "Lone-wolf Dave finally got his! I hope you'll be very happy—as happy as anyone can be in our crazy new universe."

"I was asking a question," I said delicately.

"Oh—about my private theories on the subjective effects." He gave me a look which in human terms would have been a suspicious frown. "You didn't go around blabbing them afterwards, did you? You didn't put them in one of your shiny-but-superficial books? Because it'd be a hell of a note for me to have to back down on them now in public! Not a single one was borne out in practice. The ship stayed the ship, we stayed ourselves—up to the last minute," he amended wryly. "In short, our experience of hyperspace can be summed up by saying it's like ordinary space only rather more so. It's absolutely real . . ." His voice tailed away. When he resumed, he sounded puzzled.

"In the long run, what's going to be the craziest of all is that we have to start treating our elaborate Einsteinian world-picture as a rather complicated special case of the plain ordinary Euclidean one. There's a nice paradox for you to expound to your public! Before we left, we were thinking of hyperspace as a peculiar 'elsewhere' kind of phenomenon.

From now on, I'm inclined to believe we must regard normal space as the 'elsewhere'. We just happen to be in it. If you've done any homework on your *cis*-spatial math since I've been away, maybe I can show you what I'm driving at. Dave, is something wrong?"

I must have been ghost-pale; certainly I was sweating all over and my hands were shaking. I couldn't make it clear why I'd come to my conclusion, but I had, and it felt positive.

I said, "Hell, you *are* my brother. I don't see how you can be—but you're no one else in this cockeyed universe than Leon Drummond."

XVII

AFTER THAT they plagued me to explain: Graubmayer, Sico and Lenister by turns, separately or together. All I could say was that I had been convinced. Over and over I threw back what Graubmayer himself had said—that Leon and I had been closer even than most siblings are; over and over I declared that I could have shut my eyes and forgotten there was a strange blue-black creature facing me.

The nearest I could come to defining what had settled the matter for me was to compare it with an author's style. Just as an experienced critic can tell by the flavour of a few paragraphs that they are the work of such-and-such a writer, I'd been compelled while listening to accept that Leon was talking—the turns of phrase were his, the little mannerisms of emphasis and hesitation could belong to nobody else.

Still they pestered me, until at last I could stand their interrogation no longer, and blew up.

"For God's sake!" I shouted. "What does it *mean* to go on asking if this is not 'really' my brother? If there's some kind

of super-being that can imitate him well enough to satisfy me, then by comparison we're nothing better than insects and we've got to swallow the fact!"

They exchanged frowns.

"I—I've been arguing on those lines," Lenister said at last. "But I can't get people to agree with me. Either their pride rebels, or they jump to the conclusion that such super-beings must be hostile. I don't see that that follows. I'm more inclined to think they'll just be curious about us."

"If we become a nuisance . . ." Sico said in a dead voice, and let the suggestion float in the air.

"Yes. If we become a nuisance, they may very well act against us as we would act against—to borrow Drummond's analogy—a species of insect that proved to be destructive." Lenister wiped his face. "And we have absolutely nothing to guide us. How can we tell what constitutes nuisance value where minds like theirs are concerned?"

The more I learned of this lunatic new cosmos, the less I liked it.

"Such power terrifies me," Graubmayer muttered. "It's not my field, but the idea of them looking out of their own universe, if that's what they're doing, into the sky of ours is appalling!"

"There are still a lot of things which haven't been explained to me," I ventured. All three of them laughed harshly, but no one said anything. I went on, "Am I right in thinking that our trial shot across the Solar System is supposed to have attracted the attention of these creatures in their—well—natural environment? And that when *Starventure* intruded into hyperspace they were watching for it? Then they managed to study it during its trip, and gathered so much information that by the time of its return to the vicinity of Earth they were able to do this incredible thing to Leon and the rest of the crew?"

"We have no better hypothesis," Lenister confirmed.

"Then obviously we've somehow got to locate the crew's old bodies, down on Earth!" I was sweating, thinking how well it was possible to scatter sixty people over the continents in a full week.

"Of course we have!" Sico rapped savagely. "You realise we were not immediately told of the appearance of members of the crew on Earth? We were not even informed that you yourself had seen your brother's body the day of the ship's return!"

Defensively, I said, "But I didn't make a secret of it, you know. In fact, I was so startled I went directly to the UN press chief in Quito, and that was when I heard of the ship's arrival."

"I'm not blaming you," Sico sighed. "Even we, who first learned the truth some days ago, failed to digest it at once. Still, something is at last being done, isn't it?"

I nodded. "A colleague of mine—one of the best-informed and ablest men I know—offered to set up an investigation programme. By this time it should be well under way. They may even have traced some of the"—I hesitated, because it was such an eerie turn of phrase—"crew's bodies."

"When we do track them down," Graubmayer said gloomily, "I don't like to think what we may find."

There were two more "confrontations", lasting longer than the first, and for me even harder to face. Once I'd accepted that this was indeed Leon, the thought of him being trapped by some unimaginable super-science in that artificial inhuman form became intolerable. I was in a way ashamed of myself for not having also suffered his fate Between the second and third meetings I was assigned a spare cabin so that I could get some sleep—that is, in theory. I had slept in space previously without the recurrent falling-fears which prevented some people from relaxing. This time I was driven to resort to forced-sleep again, because every time I shut my eyes I kept seeing visions of Leon.

The purpose of the first meeting had been merely to establish Leon's identity. For the other two, Sico and Graubmayer briefed me beforehand with lists of particular questions. As far as I could deduce from the pattern implied by these, they were struggling to find the emotional changes in Leon's personality which must inevitably have been entrained by his new body. That made sense. Leon had

indicated one such change when he referred to his inability to feel any difference now that he had extra limbs, and his consequent puzzlement; van Camp had pointed out another when he mentioned the absence of reproductive organs in these presumptively artificial bodies.

Graubmayer seemed especially interested in the latter approach. Sexuality was generally taken to be a key factor in human personality. Much preparation, however, had gone into depressing its effect on the crewmen prior to their two-year isolation in hyperspace so as to reduce the risk of emotional tension, and hormone treatments had been administered regularly in the diet. As a result of the success of these methods, never previously tried on so large an enclosed community for such a long time, every member of the crew had an extraordinarily low index of involvement when it came to anything with sexual connotations. There was almost an air of desperation about Graubmayer's attempts to determine whether this would have been different had the crew retained their own bodies.

Closely connected with this Sico's line of attack seemed designed to establish the presence or absence of aggressive tendencies. Again, during the long return trip most of the crew's aggressive impulses would have been conditioned out of them anyway, as during the outward voyage; only during the actual stay near Alpha Centauri had the conditioning been relaxed for fear of hindering natural initiative as well.

I could see the point of what Sico was driving at. If any alienness at all was concealed behind the overlaid humanity of the crew's transferred (or imitated) personalities, it was crucially important to know if it was hostile.

For all Lenister's willingness to discard that risk, it had to be eliminated by positive evidence sooner or later.

But the matter of aggression was as slippery to grasp as the matter of sexuality. The remarkable tolerance and lack of resentment that I'd already sensed in Leon was apparently common to the majority of the crewmen: even those whose first reaction on discovering what had happened to them had been fugue and collapse had subsequently made a rapid adjustment. Horror and fear had faded, leaving a dull re-

signation or a fatalistic willingness to let experts worry for them.

Was this due to non-aggressive habits already inculcated in their former shapes, or was it artificially imposed by the makers of the new bodies? There was no means of knowing.

I was limp with relief when the time came for the ferry to depart. Lenister, by contrast, was half-minded to beg permission for an extended stay. There were two reasons why he reluctantly did not: Graubmayer and Sico were extremely capable men and had anticipated many of the new suggestions he made, and it was necessary for someone with better facilities than one could crowd aboard *Starventure* to analyse the masses of data they were acquiring. Already he had cut out work for himself, back at the spaceport, which demanded his entire attention.

I'd gone to the lock as early as I reasonably could, and put on my suit. I'd debated with myself whether I ought to go to Leon's cabin and say goodbye, but the third of our meetings had left me quite incapable of doing so. Hanging in air in the corridor near the lock, I waited impatiently for Lenister to arrive and come with me back into the ferry.

Suddenly there was a panic. A succession of people from the after ferry hold came diving up the corridor, white-faced, swinging past me as I pulled myself back against the bulkhead. There were shouts from the noseward direction. Before I could react consciously, reflex had started me in the wake of the others.

The slow curve of the corridor ensured that only about fifty feet of it were in clear sight at a time. I'd gone about that distance when I saw that the people who had passed me had met another group coming from the forward ferry hold and were turning off up the branch passage leading to the midships external vision blister. Both Sico and Graubmayer were among them. Glancing behind me, I saw that there was another batch of half a dozen excited people on my tail, including Rokossovsky.

My heart in my mouth, I crowded with everyone else into the vision blister.

I'd had no chance to ask anyone what was going on; nobody had said a word while diving down the corridors. The moment I entered the blister, I knew anyway.

Spanning a third of the visible sky, which in the ship's present attitude was centred on the constellation Argo, was a monster.

It was like Leon, and like the Quito monster, and like the Santadonna monster, and different from all of them. The first difference to strike me was its colour. It was much greener than the earlier ones to appear, and there were smaller areas of it which showed black and vacant because they radiated invisible ultraviolet. I was immediately chilled by the obvious corollary: the things were getting better at peering into our space, and energies of longer wavelength were passing through whatever fantastic window they opened on the Solar System.

Before I'd had more than a quick glimpse, though, the blister was crowded. Crossing and re-crossing, a tangle of arms and legs interfered with my view, and an authoritative voice rang out—I couldn't see whose—ordering everyone without a specific task to get back against the in-ship bulkhead. Mechanical whirring began as the automatic recorders were triggered; *Starventure*'s external vision blisters were all fitted out for spectroanalysis in every band of radiant energy.

Silent, we obeyed, leaving a small group of technicians floating close to the busy machines. Into this sudden hush a voice crackled from the all-ship PA system.

"First Earthside reports!" the voice barked. "Naked-eye observation shows nothing repeat nothing in the indicated direction. Scans with infrared, ultraviolet and radio-frequency 'scopes are being arranged as quickly as possible."

All around me I saw grim-set mouths, wide eyes and wondering looks. What could it be out there, insubstantial as though painted soap-bubble thin on the fabric of space—this monster whose mouth could open to devour *Starventure* like a toad gulping a fly?

It began to fade within minutes; just as it was vanishing, the voice over the PA blared out again.

"All Earthside reports are negative. Repeat all negative."

I turned away with the eel-like wriggle I was finally getting the knack of. I found myself face to face with Lenister, whom I hadn't previously noticed among the crowd.

"We ought to get down to the ferry," he said. "It's time to go."

"Yes," I said. "It's time to go."

XVIII

DREAMLIKE, the return slipped by me. Not the scream of air on the hull as we made our braking passes; not the way the racing world vanished in a cloud of flame as the forward rockets blazed; nothing could break my mood of solitary desolation. It was only after I had mechanically climbed down from the electric trolley which this time had met us at the ferry and brought us back across the spaceport to the briefing room that I snapped back into normal awareness.

What triggered the reaction was the sight of Brian Watchett standing impatiently alongside the illuminated globes of the orrery.

I strode towards him, seeing excited words form on his lips, and spoke before he could.

"Brian! Have you any idea if Carmen is all right?" At the back of my mind: my specious assumption that he would go looking for her.

He was taken aback. "Who?" he exclaimed as my heart sank. "Oh—your girl friend! No, I haven't seen her. Listen, though, David! We've found your brother."

My turn to be at a loss. For a few seconds the words made no sense; as far as I was concerned, Leon was up at the starship. Then I reacted.

"You mean someone else has seen him? When? Where?"

"We have a report from Athens, Greece. He was recognised there a few hours ago. I've been half-killing myself waiting for you to get back so I can take you there and confirm."

He waved at my spacekit. "For God's sake, pull yourself out of that rig and get to Cassiano's office as quickly as you can. Don't ask any more questions—there'll be time for that when we're on our way."

It was all set up: a fast car to the hotel to collect my gear and the mail that was waiting for me, and then a UN plane—a ramjet stratodiver—specially assigned to Brian for his new project. Things had been happening with incredible rapidity since I'd left for orbit.

Correction: it wasn't incredible. With Brian's determination reinforced by the spreading mood of concern among all of Earth's high authorities, it was just remarkable.

After a period of skullcracking, he had come up with a simple but ingenious means of involving the public's aid without revealing the truth. He had had it put through all available channels that there were impostors about, claiming to be members of the starship's crew. Some of them were alleged to have been planning for this moment since two years ago, to have undergone plastic surgery and voice alteration in pursuance of perfection.

During the period of uncertainty prior to the announcement of what had really happened to the crew, so the official handout continued, some of these fakers had traded on people's enthusiasm and credulity. At present they were lying low, denying any connection with *Starventure;* however, it was feared that sooner or later they might attempt confidence trickery. The public was therefore asked to notify the authorities if they saw anyone whose resemblance to a member of *Starventure*'s crew was too complete for coincidence.

There were sets of pictures with the handout—shown on TV, printed in the papers, they had appeared literally the world over.

And almost at once this report had come in from Athens.

In the car on the way to the airport I glanced through the mail which I had found awaiting me, listening to Brian's exposition with half my attention. There was only one item of importance: a 'faxed communication from Hank Sandler.

I read the opening paragraph swiftly.

"You're supposed to have been on retainer for Solar Press covering the return of *Starventure*. Following the UN release on the unfortunate effects which the crew suffered during the voyage, we expected adequate coverage and commentary on the news. As we have heard nothing, and indeed learn from our associate Manuel Segura that you left Quito on another story without specific instructions, we must assume you wish to terminate our agreement. We are legally advised . . ."

And so on. Sandler must have been boiling with rage; the phraseology of the letter had the right flavour. I balled it up and stuffed it into one of the car's ashtrays.

"Have you been fired?" Brian said. I nodded.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I spoke to Hank late last night and gathered he was furious. I couldn't think of any way of calming him down which didn't risk hinting at the truth."

"Don't blame yourself," I said savagely. "I'm getting used to my change of rôle. I guess I make a fairly good professional liar."

There was a pause.

"I only hope to heaven it really is your brother we find when we get to Athens," he said at length.

"That's exactly the point," I countered. "It won't be my brother we find. It will be someone, or *something*, using his body."

Paling, Brian stared at me. "What did you find—up there?"

I told him.

I had two hours' natural sleep in the plane, and felt a lot better when we arrived. We were expected. There were Greek police waiting, who piled us into a car and escorted us with shrieking sirens along the coast road from the air-

port. It was like being in a crazy time-machine, that brief journey. The road ran between the sun-dappled Mediterranean and the post-turn-of-century houses inland; then it turned sharply right towards Athens proper, and a broad boulevard stepped on three levels—the topmost for public transport—carried us a couple of miles. Ahead, a carefully preserved group of ruins, the Arch of Hadrian, nearly two thousand years old. A police car was parked nearby, and our driver waved to a man standing beside it. The man semaphored back,. apparently indicating things were going according to plan.

"Where is he?" I asked the other man in the car, leaning forward so I could speak in low tones.

"He is in the *Odeion Herodou Attikou,*" was the answer. "It is a classical theatre below the Acropolis."

The time-machine was at work again; now we were jolting down the narrow streets of the Plaka, which apparently hadn't changed in a century. It was mid-afternoon, so there were few people about.

"It is the third day he has been there," my informant went on. "Of course, we knew it was happening, but there was no reason to be interested until we heard from Quito about these imposters who have been seen. We do not know how it began, but the first day there were nearly two hundred people who listened, and yesterday twice as many. Today the *Odeion* is almost full."

"What's he *doing?*" I demanded. I could tell from Brian's puzzled expression that this was news to him also.

"He—talks. We have tried to find out who he really is, and where he came from, but we have nothing to guide us, you understand. He gives the name Leon Drummond very openly, but there may be several men with such a name, yes? Last week he came here on a plane from the United States. He has been in the museum on the Acropolis, he has bought many books, and he has talked with people about our famous ancient philosophers. He has visited the Stoa which is rebuilt near the Acropolis, and he has sat thinking on a piece of stone from a broken pillar. And then, suddenly, he has begun to act as a philosopher himself. And they listen!"

The car came to a halt, just behind an identical one which was parked at the end of the winding stone-flagged path up the magnificent side of the Acropolis itself. I'd visited it before, many years ago. But I'd forgotten what a terrific impact it had, crowned with its architectural masterpieces.

Our driver and his companion leapt out to speak to a senior police officer sitting in the other car; he also got out on hearing their news, and came to greet me and Brian. He spoke good English.

"The man who gives the name of your unfortunate brother is in the *Odeion* at the moment," he said. "It is very hot in the sun, but there are seven hundred people listening to him. It is probable that he is preparing some confidence trick, as it was suggested—perhaps mystical teaching from the stars, or such rubbish!"

I licked my lips, glancing up the hill to the entrance of the *Odeion*. From there, it was impossible to see this vast audience which had assembled.

"You must confirm for us that he is disguised as your brother," the police officer continued. "Then we shall be able to take him for questioning. He will need to explain himself very cleverly." He reached through the window of his own car and picked a pair of binoculars off the seat. "This way!"

There were two shocks awaiting me at the top of the steep path leading to the *Odeion*.

The first was the one I was prepared for. I knew, even before I was handed the binoculars, that this was my brother's body. It was like a physical blow to see that familiar face, hear that familiar voice ringing out over the attentive crowd.

The second was entirely different. He was speaking Russian. Presumably there were a lot of Russian tourists visiting the Acropolis this afternoon. I'd never gained more than a halting knowledge of the language, but Leon—now I came to think about it—had studied it thoroughly because of the scientific literature published in it.

I looked around. This was an amphitheatre of purest classical form—indeed, for the past century or so ancient drama had been performed here every summer. On the steep-ranked

stone benches, little more than steps, were the people who had come to listen—native Athenians and tourists intermingled. They filled all but the topmost rows. And at the head of every aisle leading down between the seats there were uniformed police sweating in the afternoon heat.

I grew aware that the police officer was asking me something. I apologised and asked him to repeat it.

"*Is* he disguised as your brother?"

"I—uh—yes, he looks exactly like my brother," I said.

The Leon-person, standing on the low stage facing the audience, paused. A question was called from the front rows, and he began to answer at length, still in Russian.

"Then we can proceed," the police officer said with grim satisfaction. "Will you accompany us, Mr. Drummond?"

"I'd rather not," I said. "Do you mind if I stay here?"

"As you like." He drew a whistle from a pocket of his uniform.

"Be careful," I almost whispered, thinking of what might really be hiding behind that Leon-face. "He's—"

Brian nudged me, as though warning me to hold my tongue, and I didn't finish the sentence.

"Don't worry," the police officer said. "We shall be very careful." He blew the whistle. The waiting policemen at the head of every gangway looked towards him; at his signal, they began to march in step down towards the stage. Behind the Leon-thing, from the actors' entrances, other police appeared.

The blowing of the whistle had attracted the attention of some of the audience. Now almost everyone took notice, looked puzzled, whispered curious and unanswered questions.

Stolidly the police closed on my "brother". He showed no reaction, apart from breaking off his discourse and looking at the encircling men with a quizzical half-smile. That was Leon's smile, too. The recognition was heart-breaking.

From the edge of the stage, the officer in charge of the operation turned and addressed the crowd, first in Greek, then English; he would presumably have gone on to any other tongue he knew, but before he had completed his

announcement the second time I could smell the anger of the crowd beginning to rise.

He had told them that this man was using the name of one of *Starventure*'s crew; that he had disguised himself, and that the real Leon Drummond was out in space still; that it was necessary to close this impromptu meeting so that the man could be questioned—

"*Ochi! Ochi!*" The shouting began quickly, in Greek; as the sense of the police officer's words reached more people, the tumult swelled. "No, let him go on! No! No!"

The moment the first policeman laid hands on "Leon," the anger exploded, and the stage was swamped by the furious crowd, demanding that he be allowed to go on talking. It took fully ten minutes for order to be restored . . . and by then, nobody knew how, the creature in my brother's body had disappeared.

XIX

WHEN THE TEMPERS had cooled, at least to the point where some of us were thinking coherently again, a search was ordered. I was already sickly certain that it would fail. Some of the police fanned out around the approaches to the Acropolis, while others ran to their cars and alerted by radio the entire local force. Meantime, the furious officer in charge questioned the members of the audience whom he had managed to detain on some convenient charge—obstructing police in the execution of their duty, perhaps.

It became clear at once that it was no good asking about the disappearance of "Leon". I knew—though he didn't—that there were probably ways open to my "brother" where we could not follow. In an attempt to salvage some advantage from the fiasco, I persuaded Brian to put questions

of his own, concentrating on what "Leon" had been saying to make his hearers so eager for more.

Maybe we'd get some clue to the nature of the body's present occupant.

From the Russians who had occupied most of the front rows of the theatre, and to whom "Leon" had chiefly been addressing himself this afternoon, we could learn little. Sullenly, they avoided our inquiries, pretended to miss the point or were deliberately evasive. I reflected that they were a people with long memories, and inclined to distrust policemen.

From some of the Athenians, though, we got better results, and particularly from a pleasant-mannered elderly woman called Iris Argyros, a classical scholar of some kind.

"It is the first time I have ever experienced such an event," she declared, eyes glowing. "I have dreamed all my life of sitting at the feet of another Socrates and hearing him expound the nature of the world with crystalline logic. And today it has happened."

Excellent. "But what was he talking about?" Brian pressed.

"Much of the time he was speaking Russian, and I didn't understand all of it. But I speak quite good English, and he had also addressed us in that language." She bit her lower lip and rolled her eyes upwards as though seeking inspiration. "It's impossible to summarise his arguments, becasue they were of extreme rigour. In any case, it wasn't the substance of what he was saying, but the beautiful logic and the vivid metaphors and analogies which—"

"Yes, *but what was he talking about?*"

"Oh!" She looked vaguely surprised. "The nature of truth, the human habit of forming inflexible opinions and clinging to them because to do anything else offends our vanity and our self-esteem. In particular, he was demonstrating how scientific orthodoxy conflicts with the concept of objective truth."

Brian gave me a blank look. Drawing me aside, he asked in a low tone, "David, how do you imagine he gets people to enjoy dry matter like that?"

"God knows," I muttered. "I've spent most of my working

life trying to pre-package ideas for the great and wonderful public, but I've never tackled philosophical concepts of that order. I wouldn't dare"

Brian clenched his fists "If only those knuckleheaded police had thought of recording what he said!" he exclaimed.

But they hadn't, and not one of the dozens of listeners we questioned was able to give us fuller details. It was as if they had been spellbound during the discourse, and then had woken to find the words fading like images from a dream.

Or like the—creature—which had uttered them.

As the hope of locating our quarry faded, I began to be aware of just how much had been going on since I went up to *Starventure*. Coming on top of the shock of meeting Leon in his alien form, the news Brian had given me had scarcely sunk in, although he had told me more than just his attempts to obtain reports of the crew's bodies He had said something about a staff to handle the reports and evalute them, and a team seconded from UN headquarters to assist Chambord with the maintenance of our official lies.

The one related point about which I had not inquired was how the public was taking the recurrent appearance of sky-monsters. That was too big a thing for any ingenious falsehood to conceal. When I thought about it, I half-expected panic, but so far there was none; there was, however, a continual nervous argument in progress the world over, especially among scientists, and this fact was emphasised in papers and news-bulletins. For once modern man's habit of leaving things to experts was paying dividends.

But it wouldn't last. Sooner or later our nerve would snap.

Brian had told me, back in Quito before we set out to insist on the real facts, that both the UN Secretary-General and the chairman of the General Assembly had been to confer with the scientists at the spaceport. If you knew this, certain items in the news took on interesting implications. It looked to me very much as though starflight was going to be abandoned, for my lifetime at any rate, but its appropriations both of men and money were going to be

continued, officially for research into the physiological and psychological problems I had helped Brian to invent, actually to investigate the sky-monsters and what they had done to *Starventure*'s crew.

I felt a kind of irrational and helpless anger. This was so gigantic a disruption of our concept of reality! Was it because people already sensed the fact that they were so willing to listen to "Leon"?

Cork-wise, I bobbed and spun on a flood of despair.

Meantime we had sixty human bodies with inhuman minds at large among Earth's five billion population—doing what? Something as innocuous as "Leon", philosophising to a chance-assembled audience . . . or something sinister, incomprehensible, dangerous?

Late that night, more reports came in for Brian at the Athens police headquarters, 'faxed by satellite relay from Quito. In a room assigned to us there, we sorted through them. There were about a dozed altogether, of which most were vague and tinged with hysteria; only a couple had a ring of accuracy. Chandra Dan's body (that was not how the message was phrased, but we read it that way) had been seen at a festival in the holy city of Benares; he had spoken to a vast gathering of people much as "Leon" had done. Wisely, the Indian police had taken no action, but were keeping him under observation. And a crewman I didn't know, Yussuf bin Saleem, was reported in Mecca—again, attracting people and talking to them. Unfortunately the police had been more precipitate and had attempted to take him in for questioning; he had vanished as "Leon" had, under cover of a confused mêlée.

"What do you think?" Brian snapped at me. With difficulty I ordered my muddled brain.

"I have a wild idea," I said after a pause. It had only just come to me.

"What?"

I leaned forward in my chair, staring at the floor. "It's just a guess—but so far we have Athens, Benares, Mecca: doesn't that hint at a pattern? They're centres of human

religious and ethical teaching. I'd say we want to watch for more appearances in Rome, Jerusalem, and any other city from which a great teacher or a school has influenced the world."

Brian stared as though I'd been talking nonsense. I didn't know. Maybe I had.

"Are you serious?" he demanded.

"Why in hell not?" I was suddenly annoyed. "Maybe it was that Argyros woman, with her reference to Socrates, that put it into my head. But—"

I broke off, sitting up with a start. Wherever the notion had come from, it made sense. Cockeyed—but sense nonetheless.

"Listen!" I went on. "We've been struggling to decide why the aliens"—the term was automatic by now—"should be acting as they are: transferring the crew's minds into new bodies, in particular. I think there's an explanation so obvious we've never considered it!"

"I—" Brian bit his lip. "No, finish what you're going to say. But I think I'm with you, and I'd love to believe you're right!"

"Figure it this way," I said. "Up at *Starventure* they're working on the assumption that—by some means we don't yet understand—the aliens contrived to study the ship and her crew during the voyage through hyperspace. Put yourself in their place. Suppose we were suddenly confronted with another race that was apparently intelligent: what would be the second thing about them you wanted to investigate after satisfying yourself about their technical skills, which must presumably be your yardstick for granting them status as rational beings?"

"Their psychology," Brian said at once. "Most of all, their probable attitude towards us—whether they look on us as rivals or whether they're willing to treat us as friends and equals."

"Precisely. But it wouldn't be safe, would it, to regard a sample of sixty out of five billion as a basis for decision?"

"Of course not. To start with, the crew of a pioneering ship like *Starventure* would be completely atypical. They'd

be handpicked, and their responses would differ completely from a world-wide average."

"So you'd want to know the ideals of the race you were making contact with. You'd want to know the standards they were attempting to live up to. And where those standards seemed to you inadequate as a basis for friendly contact, if you had a means of doing so, you'd try to influence them favourably towards you."

"Is that really what you think is being done to us?"

"I don't 'really think' anything," I said. For a few moments I'd thought I had an inspiration; now, however, what I'd said seemed so banal compared to the magnitude of the change in our fortunes that I almost wished I hadn't opened my mouth.

Brian, however, had a thoughtful expression. "I acted far too quickly," he muttered. "My only excuse is that we'd had a week of no action at all. How the devil am I going to make our story about impostors fit with instructions to local police forces not even to take them in for questioning? But it'll have to be done somehow. We're up against creatures with powers we've never dreamed of, that's certain. I don't want a repetition of what happened here this afternoon, or in Mecca. Where's the borderline between proper caution and open hostility in an alien mind?"

"Are you taking me seriously?" I demanded.

"Why not?" He gave me a look of faint surprise. "Damnation, David! It's better to have some theory about their intentions than none at all, isn't it? And we've had none so far, apart from fearful suspicions." He turned over the 'faxed reports before him. "Indeed, I'm going to take you so seriously that I'll advise Rome and Jerusalem to expect crewmen to show up there, and any other place that occurs to me, and we'll see if your proposed pattern stands up."

"I guess it might be worth trying," I muttered.

He gave a sympathetic frown. "You must have been through hell," he exclaimed. "I'm sorry—I've been driving you, haven't I?"

"Have you? I didn't expect anything else, you know—in

fact if you'd not told me about Leon's body appearing here, I'd have been blind angry."

"Yes, but it's been a wild-goose chase, hasn't it? Look, David, I saw the way you flaked out in the plane on the way here. I know you didn't get any sleep the night before last, and I imagine you got no sleep aboard *Starventure*, either—not after the shock of recognising your brother. You're living on your nerves right now. Why don't you book a hotel room and go and sleep the clock around? I'll keep you in touch with developments, I promise. I haven't any personal involvement like yours."

I got up. "Not a bad idea," I said. "But I'm not going to take my sleep in a hotel in Athens. I'm going to book a night-couch on a trans-Atlantic express and head back to Quito."

"Not just to be back at the centre of things," Brian said after a moment of hesitation. "Am I right?"

"You're right," I said. "I've got another personal involvement besides Leon. I'm pretty damned certain he won't be found again in a hurry, so there's no point in my staying, is there?"

"She's a very attractive girl, your Carmen. Are you thinking of marrying her, maybe?"

"Thinking," I said bitterly. "Right now, I don't even know if I'll find her again, and if I find her I'm not sure I'll recognise her as the same person."

XX

ABOUT THE ONLY consolation, I reflected dully as my cab rolled back from the airport towards the city centre of Quito, was that we'd got into the habit of e'ecting cynics to govern us. People with fixed notions about the world were suffering

worst now it was topsy-turvy; we could rely for a while longer on our administrators, whose notions were strictly empirical. After all, when Galileo's news broke, most people probably waited a moment to see if the world felt any different, found it didn't, and kept right on going.

So the big panic was in the minds of the Lenisters, the Graubmayers and the Watchetts. Other folk were going about their business with only occasional pauses for anxiety. Here on the Calle Carpenter, for example, one of Quito's newest and smartest shopping streets, the crowds were as thick as they always were, and only the odd glance towards the sky or short-lived look of worry betrayed the fact that—

"Stop!" I shouted at my driver. Panicky reflex made him slam the brakes on, nearly hurling me forward from my seat. He half-turned, framing insults; I threw some cash at him, telling him to wait for me, and leapt out of the cab. Like a madman I raced up the nearest ascensor to the shopping-level ten feet above the trafficway. I pushed frantically between the slow-moving shoppers, calling at the top of my voice.

"Carmen! *Carmen!*"

People I jostled swung around to complain; I was already past. I caught sight of her again, twenty paces ahead, apparently not having heard me, for she was walking steadily away from me. Putting on a spurt and almost knocking down those who got in my way, I managed to catch up and clutch at her arm.

Startled, she spun to face me. She was wearing black—an outfit I'd seen before. What I'd never seen before was dirt on her low shoes and bare feet, black rims to her fingernails, her hair hanging in a tangle on the nape of her neck. She was wearing no makeup, and her eyes were brighter even than usual.

"David!" she said, and for a moment my heart hesitated. Then she gave a pleased smile. "I have been looking for you! I called your hotel yesterday when I found my brother, to tell you about it, but you weren't there."

"To tell me what?" I said, my mind drained by shock to a foolish emptiness.

"My brother Hermanos—I found him yesterday morning. I knew I would, if I let my instinct guide me. I want you to see him, so you know it's true, so you don't need to worry about Leon any longer."

Standing here, it was my turn to be jostled and poked by passers-by. I took her hand and drew her to the side of the walk where we would be less of an obstruction. I took a deep breath.

"I've seen Leon's body," I said. "I saw it in Greece."

"His—body?" Her slim hand with its un-Carmen-like dirty nails went to her mouth. "Oh, David, you mean he is dead?"

"Worse than dead," I said curtly. "The body moves and speaks, but the mind isn't Leon, any more than the mind in what you're talking about is Hermanos."

Her lips a little parted, her eyes fixed on my face, she shook her head helplessly. "David, I don't understand you. Who should know Hermanos better than his family—than I?"

"You say you've seen him. Have you talked to him?"

"Yes—yes, of course!"

"Did he recognise you at once? Did he seem strangely behaved? Does he sound like Hermanos when he speaks?"

"He says wonderful things! You must hear him—"

"Answer my question," I gritted. "Did he recognise you?"

A flicker of worry came and went behind her eyes. "It had been two years—" she began defensively.

"I thought so. He didn't know you. Because the thing that moves him like a puppet on strings is *not Hermanos*, don't you hear me?" I was suddenly terrified at my own inability to make clear what had happened. I was suddenly afraid that I might be mouthing nonsense. "Your brother is aboard *Starventure*, trapped like mine in an alien body. Didn't you believe a word that Suvorov told you? Didn't you read the papers, watch TV hear people talking and waying that the crew are still in the ship, and their bodies are—?"

Like the shutter of a camera, black disbelief closed over her mind. I broke off. Nothing I could say would reach her. This was as much a stranger in a familiar body as "Hermanos" or "Leon".

"Come with me, David," she said. "I will show you."

"Where?" I snapped. "Where is he?"

"Come with me," she repeated. "If you don't see with your own eyes, you won't believe me. I won't say where I'm taking you. I don't want strangers to come, people who will interfere."

"Then—" My mind raced. "Look, I have a cab waiting on the trafficway below. We can—"

"There are radios in cabs," she cut in. "The driver would have to say where he was going. No, David. We will walk there. I came to the city on foot this morning, and I can go back the same way. It is up to you whether you come or not."

She made to turn away with finality. But she couldn't quite manage it, and the fact broke through my mounting despair. She checked, glanced back at me with a trace of hope.

No, I'd been wrong. She wasn't a stranger. She was the Carmen I'd mistakenly imagined I knew well, the only woman I'd ever met with whom I believed I could spend a lifetime and not be unhappy. Obstinate, but not stupid; fey, but not superstitious. All right, on the face of it it was more reasonable to think that a mind could be altered by the passage of time than that it could be displaced from its own body altogether. She hadn't had the shattering experience I'd had aboard *Starventure*. In the same situation, without having recognised Leon in his alien form, I'd have clung to the reasonable explanation.

"All right," I said at last.

She squeezed my hand and smiled, and for a moment I almost stopped thinking I was a damned fool.

I went beside her as obediently as a well-trained dog. She led me from the Calle Carpenter along the Calle Titov, from the glittering store-fronts to the plain, rather makeshift apartment blocks of the artisan quarter which had been thrown up at the time when the spaceport began to bring fame and prosperity to this highland capital city. There were peasant markets here still; on stalls each of which prominently displayed a municipal trading licence men and

women with Indian features offered traditional handicrafts and foodstuffs. The crowds were as dense as, but more purposeful than, those in the Calle Carpenter. There was an air of haste which came to me even through my preoccupation.

"People seem to be—uh—going our way," I muttered when I finally read a pattern into the flow of the throng.

"Yes. There was another angel in the sky last night." She answered absently, as though her mind was on another subject.

"Angel?" I echoed.

She caught herself and turned a laughing face to me. "Well, one has to give them some name, I guess!"

"Do you mean a monster like the one we saw together from your apartment the evening *Starventure* came back?"

"Ah—" She hesitated. "It doesn't seem . . . You know, it doesn't *feel* right to call them monsters. Huge shining creatures that move in the heavens—they might as well be nick-named angels as anything else, mightn't they?"

"Are you trying to tell me that some kind of folklore has grown up around them in just a few days?"

She didn't quite know how to answer that. I tried again. "You mean the people are heading the way we're heading *because* there was a thing in the sky last night."

"Yes. They are afraid, of course. So they're going to hear Hermanos, and he will give them courage."

"What on earth is he doing?"

"He—talks to people. David, why ask me to explain? In a little while you can hear for yourself!"

It was like a pilgrimage. The crazy time-machine I'd imagined in Athens was still affecting me. We walked among stone-faced people like Aztec idols, some in modern clothing, some with a *serape* or a *rebozo* tossed about them as a kind of conscious gesture to the past. There was no definite beginning to their irregular procession; simply, there were people on the road ahead when we left the city, in small groups or by themselves, and there were many more behind us. I felt as conspicuous as a leper. Carmen's face,

bearing and complexion matched those of the straggling crowd, but I was a white North American, and the only one as far as I could see. I had a sense of isolation, of being cut off from some fundamental source of knowledge which these people accepted and never questioned.

The road deteriorated when it passed the outlying private homes, and became a gravelled track winding around the shoulder of a hill. We came on people who had set out earlier than the rest and exhausted themselves, sitting by the road and gathering energy to continue. My own feet, unused to walking, began to ache, and I suspected a blister on my right heel.

"Where are we going?" I demanded finally. "To some village or other?"

"Yes, to a village. It is not far—only eight kilometres from Quito."

Five miles. I guessed we'd covered about a mile and a half since leaving the city limits. I looked around at the inhospitable landscape—to my eyes, at any rate. That time machine was very efficient. The countryside seemed raw from nature's hand; the towers of Quito, visible on glancing back, were like a temporary intrusion, and might prove to be a misty illusion and blow away.

But it was probably a background that most of these people had known since childhood. Their ancestors were part of this soil. Their beliefs were drawn against these rocks and that oppressive sky.

Carmen's, too.

And this also was humanity's heritage. The dirt and disorder of the world were closer to us than our new, clean, sterile machines. The confusion of mountains, the tangle of forests, were more familiar than the stark blackness beyond the air, where *Starventure* had roamed.

We had deluded ourselves that we could cope up there. We imagined we could reduce the cosmos to simple and predictable rules. I thought of the race's finest minds battling with an insoluble enigma; I thought of Leon, puzzled but patient, in a body wished on him by . . . all right, a

miracle. A miracle is a happening contrary to the laws of nature, and all our laws forbade this event.

Call them angels, too—why not?

The road wound, steep and stony and narrow, and the mass of people passing along it thickened as those ahead wearied and those behind grew more eager. We were almost shoulder to shoulder as we completed the journey and came in sight of the village which was our goal.

It was nothing special—a square into which the road led, with an old church on one side, a blatantly new concrete building opposite which proved to be a library, a school also of concrete but considerably older, and some sort of administrative offices. Behind these, houses: still thatched with reed or cane of some kind, but with modern metal-framed windows set in their pale-brown walls. And beyond, the fields of corn and imported grass for a few cattle to graze and root-crops which I didn't recognise. Clearly, the place had been touched by progress—the grass in particular spoke of UN assistance—but the people had done their best to ignore the fact.

Most of the newcomers, moving as though completing a traditional act, settled down in the dusty square, taking advantage of patches of shade or spreading their *serapes* and *rebozos* like awnings. Early arrivals had sat on the two cars parked in the square and the one old and dirty truck; the rest sat on the ground.

But Carmen, catching my hand, led me through the crowd and across the square, past the dazzling concrete walls of the new library whose bulk dipped us briefly into shadow, towards a house larger than most, on whose verandah a portly priest sat in an old rocking-chair talking with a slender man whose complexion was exactly the shade of Carmen's, and who wore a white shirt and loose white peasant-style trousers belted with a bright red sash.

He looked towards us and gave a nod, his face calm and friendly. I recognised that face. It was indeed the face and body of Hermanos Iglesias before me. And now, after what felt like an eternity, I was going to find out what alien mind inhabited it.

XXI

THE APPALLING THING was he also recognised me.

I had no doubt of it, the moment he glanced up from his conversation with the stout priest. The dark eyes—so like Carmen's—in his sallow face met mine, and it was as if a current flowed. I tore my mind away from attempted explanations, such as that Carmen must have told him whom she was going to find and bring back with her; I needed all my will power to master a sudden sense of dislocation. I was afraid I might lose my control over myself and become a credulous peasant.

It was also pointless to spin myself comforting lies about someone forewarning him and telling him who I was. He didn't recognise me: *David Drummond, Leon's brother.* He recognised me: *a person who knows what has happened.*

My frantic struggle for self-possession found words. I said in a voice so harsh I barely knew it for my own, "Well, *monster,* what is it you want?" I spoke in English simply because it was my mother-tongue, having no idea whether Hermanos would understand me. Carmen gave a little horrified gasp and took a half-pace away from me, her eyes rounding. The priest, not taking the sense of my words but the tone of my voice, looked startled and stopped rocking his chair.

"Wrong question," the alien said, with an absolutely human intonation and a human quirk of his mouth. "The important thing is: what do you want, the people of Earth? I'm having the devil's job trying to find out."

I had expected evasion, denial, anything but this bland acceptance of my accusation. I was completely taken aback, and while I was still at a loss Hermanos had excused himself to the priest, who half-raised his right hand as though

minded to pronounce a blessing but let it fall back to his lap, and had stepped down from the verandah to confront me.

With an expression of great interest he looked me over. "You sound personally offended," he said. "Are you David Drummond, by any chance?"

I licked my lips and glanced at Carmen. She was standing apart from us, her gaze riveted on her brother's face. At last I nodded. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

"Good," Hermanos said. "We learned about you from your brother Leon, of course. Have you seen him?"

I almost choked with fury, and he laid his hand on my arm, apparently much concerned. "Is he not well? He should not be suffering in spite of what we did to him—we took great care!"

Shaking his hand off me, I forced my anger down to a level at which I could talk. "Yes, I've seen him! I've seen both him, and his stolen body!"

"And you are angry because you don't understand, and you are trying to hide your fear." Hermanos sounded as analytical as a psychologist reviewing an unusual pattern of symptoms. "Yet you're a science-writer, having at least a nodding acquaintance with the whole of modern human knowledge. What a lot you've forgotten—what an *incredible* amount!"

I couldn't make sense of that, and I didn't want to try. I rounded on the priest, calling up all the limited Spanish I could command.

"You there!" I bawled at him. "What do you make of this—this creature that talks like a man? He's not a man! He's a creature possessed of a devil! And why are you sitting on that verandah when out there in the plaza your flock are blaspheming against the holy angels, saying they are the monsters that appear in the sky?"

The priest, startled, looked at Hermanos and back at me. He said, "Sir, is the heat affecting you? This is a good man of great wisdom. He is not possessed of a devil! And why should I stop my people talking of angels? The things in the sky are God's creatures one way or another!"

He gave a fat, toothy smile and went back to rocking his chair as though that settled the matter permanently.

"Hermanos," Carmen ventured nervously, "please forgive David for what he said. He isn't himself—he's upset, he's had a shock of some kind . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"Oh, to hell with it!" I said in English. "The world's gone crazy and I'm tired of arguing. Monsters talk with the words of men and men turn out to be monsters in disguise and the skies are full of angels and to hell with it *all!*"

I spun on my heel, my eyes stinging and my mind reeling.

"That's more like it," Hermanos said behind me, his voice level. "Angels. Which is exactly what they are."

I checked and put my clenched fists to my head. My brain felt as though it might burst my skull.

"Mr. Drummond, come back here," Hermanos said. "I want to talk to you. I want to put a hypothesis to you. In fact, I may very well want your help."

"Help!" I repeated, and gave a sour laugh.

"I said so." His voice was still calm. "What was in your mind in coming here—to force a confession out of me, perhaps?"

"No." At least I managed to make that point. "You can escape by ways where we can't follow you. I learned that from the one who is disguised as my brother."

"Now you're rationalising. The intention was at the back of your mind. Instead, you find me"—he shrugged—"frank about it. Why not? Is there any lie I could tell which you would swallow? So, further: what's the point of striding away in a bad temper now?"

"Should I stay and listen to lies that you hope I *will* fall for?" I countered.

" 'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer!" Hermanos flung up his hands. "Are you become a race of Pilates, you human beings? Are you so obsessed with your little local treasury of empirical facts that you don't care any more about greater truths? Is the pinnacle of your ambition to grub in a yard of dirt and never turn your face to the sun?"

He had paled with the intensity of his emotion; on the

last word he snapped his jaw shut like a beartrap, and the muscles of his cheeks knotted.

"David!" Carmen said. "Why won't you listen to him? Are you afraid he may make you believe what he says?" There was a hint of reluctant scorn in her voice, as though she had hoped better of the David Drummond she knew.

I moved towards the verandah. The priest, who had watched without following our heated exchanges, gave a sigh of relief and waved me courteously to a vacant chair propped against the wall.

"Thank you," Hermanos said. He didn't take a chair for himself, but jumped up and balanced on the carved wooden rail at the front of the verandah, finding a purchase for his heels and leaning his elbows on his knees. "I'm a little surprised that you haven't already learned some of what I'm going to tell you from your brother. Did he talk to you about his experiences in hyperspace—as you call it?"

I bit my lip and glanced at Carmen, who was leaning now against one of the verandah pillars. Feeling quite ridiculous to be discussing such a subject with a creature I knew not to be human, I said, "He said a few things about it. He said it was like ordinary space only more so. And he said we might have to treat our own Einsteinian universe as a special case of the hyperspatial continuum. But I didn't get what he meant."

Hermanos nodded judiciously. "It was to be expected that the mathematicians, like your brother, would glimpse the truth ahead of other people. But it'll take a while to digest, apparently. Well! Now I have your attention, Mr. Drummond, I'd like to ask you if you're familiar with a few points that form the basis of my argument. You're an educated man, so I think you'll recognise them all. The Platonic theory of the Ideal?"

I nodded.

"The Jungian theory of archetypes? The legends of the Golden Age and the Garden of Eden? The Islands of the Blest? And so on?"

"Of course! But I don't see—"

"Patience, please." He held up his hand. There was an al-

together disarming grin on his face. His *borrowed* face. I had to keep reminding myself of that. "In the ordinary course of everyday life—particularly primitive life—does a man run across such things as a perfectly straight line, a perfect right angle, a perfect half of something?"

"Uh—no." I shifted on my chair. I was sweating unpleasantly, as though my life depended on answering his questions. "But that was probably one of the riddles which influenced the formulation of the theory of the Ideal which you already mentioned, and it seems like a hell of a long way from angels!"

"Not really. What was bothering old Plato was something that seems to have stopped worrying people nowadays—why, in short, people who had never seen a truly straight line or a perfect half of any solid object were capable of formulating the concepts so clearly. Over the past century or so you seem to have become so preoccupied with your mechanical ingenuity you've given up asking that."

I was on the point of objecting. But I changed my mind. I could not, indeed, think of any twenty-first century philosopher who'd seriously attacked the problem of ideals. It was thoroughly out of fashion.

I admitted as much.

"Yes. If it weren't out of fashion, I've no doubt someone would have got at the implications of hyperspace even before a human-built ship flew through it. Now bear in mind what I said about legends of Golden Ages and Gardens of Eden and so on, and consider the following proposition.

"What you commonly call 'normal space' is a very special case indeed of 'hyperspace'—indeed, an *artificial distortion* of it. Human awareness is not native to such a continuum and includes concepts which have no real referent in it; it sees 'through a glass darkly' in consequence and in days when the shock was fresher attempts were made to convey a vague memory of the fact by means of myths and legends."

I couldn't decide whether to be more surprised by the suggestion itself, or the erudite fluency in human communication with which a self-confessed alien was presenting it. I settled on the former.

"Not—native to such a continuum?" I echoed. "What's that supposed to mean? To me it's just noise!"

He sighed. "Yes, that's inevitable. I've been trying to think of comparisons. You took a very roundabout route back to the simplicity of hyperspace—through all kinds of mathematical detours—precisely because your awareness has been deformed by your present environment. Imagine, though! Imagine a railroad train on perfectly parallel tracks. It'll run smoothly and evenly without wasting unnecessary power. Bend one of the tracks inwards a little, so that it rubs on the wheels like a brake; the train will run slower and energy will go to waste. Now try regarding the four dimensions of the space-time continuum as rails, which should be straight and are not straight but twisted. Envisage some of the effects."

I tried to concentrate. "Red shift?" I said finally.

"Yes, an excellent example!" Hermanos exclaimed. "But it doesn't only manifest itself over interstellar distances. The speed of light is lower; the chronon—the time-quantum—is unnecessarily large; mental processes and indeed all processes are thickened and made coarse."

In spite of my reluctance, I was beginning to call to mind points which supported these fantastic notions. What had they told me at *Starventure* about Chandra Dan in his new body? He had seemed to be thinking instantaneously, and they had had to get him to a computer because no normal human being could cope with his reaction-times.

"I shall have to go around to the plaza," Hermanos added. "A lot of people have come to see me today."

"What for?" I said.

"Reassurance, I guess. They're frightened. They aren't used to the sky being full of angels. Because I don't seem to be disturbed by it, they—they look to me. They look to *us*, rather. You said you'd seen Leon's body. What else was he doing but talking to people and reassuring them?"

I licked my lips. "You keep talking about our space-time being artificially distorted. You've been implying that we somehow came 'from' your universe 'to' ours." I stressed the "from" and "to" because they weren't accurate; we didn't

have the correct concepts in human language. "What's supposed to have brought this about?"

"I can't tell you," Hermanos said flatly. "The referents are *so* different. I can just draw your attention to a very well-known myth—one that concerns the fall of a group of arrogant angels. There are many races in the higher continuum I'm talking about. Yours used to be one of them."

He gave a fleeting smile and got down from the rail of the verandah. "Stay here and think it over," he invited. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

XXII

CARMEN WENT after him. So did the priest, levering himself out of his chair and waddling away. I was left by myself with a myriad unanswered questions thundering around my skull.

My first impulse was to reject everything that had been said to me. But that was stupid. Faced with inexplicable events, it was more rational to accept any proposed hypothesis one could, and at least modify it before discarding it.

I tried to calm my raging mind and work out the consequences of Hermanos's statements.

First, then: the higher continuum which we called hyperspace was supposed to be similar to our own but without the "artificial distortions". It would be infinite . . . no, just a moment. Such concepts as distance would there be of a different order. What kind of clues were there to a comprehension of the difference, apart from Hermanos's vague invocation of legends?

Cantorian transfinite math, of course. I wondered why Hermanos hadn't instanced that, too. Maybe he'd wanted to leave me something to work out myself.

I knew from Leon that Cantor's concepts had provided some of the basic tools for the design of *Starventure*. That fitted with the idea of a continuum where our concepts were magnified beyond the ability of an untrained mind to grasp them. Speed, distance, anything with which a time-factor was associated, must take on a new meaning. You couldn't guess at that meaning. Probably, once your mind had formed, you couldn't even experience it in a way you could later interpret; otherwise Leon and other members of *Starventure's* crew would have been able to explain it to us on their return.

Location, separation—there was no end to the list of commonplace intuitive ideas which would be upset by transferral into higher-order space! I wrenched my mind away from that path which led spiralling dizzily towards chaos, and tried to find an alternative approach.

What would it be like from *their* point of view? No good trying to picture their forms of experience, clearly. At least, though, one could speculate on their view of our universe . . . We had been assuming the continuum to be finite but boundless, like the surface of a globe. That might hold; it would imply that our whole plenum was contained in theirs, and incapable of interacting with it or influencing it until *Starventure* broke free of Einsteinian limitations.

I felt myself go cold all over. I was no judge of the question, really, but as far as I could tell the arguments were consistent.

After whatever inconceivable conflict had led to the calamity Hermanos had compared to a fall of angels, we would have been lost to them: shut off in some locally deformed and inaccessible sub-area of space-time. What was the word I was groping for? Incommunicado, of course.

And perhaps they were happy to let us be. Whatever we had done, it must be a deed not soon forgotten.

If, though, after the passage of millennia we struggled back from our isolation (imprisonment? Self-imposed or decreed as punishment?), perhaps in this way re-identifying our whereabouts, they would wish to find out what had

become of us. They would look into our cosmos and examine our Solar System . . .

Now *that* was right! I remembered the worried voice I had heard over the PA system in *Starventure*'s vision blister when we had crowded to look at the latest of the monsters in the sky. I'd thought then that the shift of its colour towards green indicated an improvement in their ability to—to enter our space. What we were seeing would be radiation (of very high, blue and even ultraviolet, frequencies) emitted at right angles from a tangential point between our space, distorted as Hermanos called it, and their space. No wonder the monster wasn't visible from Earth; no wonder the Santadonna monster, studied with such care, had no effective mass although its apparent location was at the edge of the atmosphere. The thing we could see was only a less-than-paper-thin image.

Abbott: *Flatland*. A finger through a plane surface would appear to the inhabitants of that surface as a rounded obstacle of insanely variable diameter.

There must be a great many things in common between their universe and ours, after all. Leon had said, "Like ordinary space only more so." But perceived with a fuller awareness, the things we named matter, energy, earth and stars, would be changed. Somehow. Again I could call an illustration to mind. Haldane had speculated on the subjective realities experienced by other species: not only those like us, such as nose-dominated dogs, but those far distant from us. To a bee, he argued, a concept of duty would be as "real" as our notion of, say, solidity.

Somewhere along those lines one might come to truth.

And, granting all this, one could see why Hermanos did not prevaricate when I challenged him. What could *they* have to fear from us, trapped in an inferior universe and constrained to follow twisted paths? The greater might comprehend the lesser, and in this case obviously it did. The greater had been able to lift human personalities as neatly as mechanical components out of their own bodies and into others, so that the direct experience of human limitations could be made available for study.

Yes, but . . . having studied us, what did they intend to *do*?

It was approaching sunset when I walked around the side of the library and back to the plaza. People were preparing to leave; some far-sighted merchant had obtained a supply of wax torches for the return trip—darkness would come like a curtain falling here on the Equator—and people were buying them from his stall the other side of the square. Another stall was selling tortillas and a kind of enchilada to those who had omitted to bring their own food.

Hermanos was standing by the latter stall, eating and talking to a succession of inquirers. Carmen and the priest were listening intently. I stood a few paces away until there was a break in the conversation; then Hermanos nodded to me and excused himself from the others. There was a twinkle in his eye when he addressed me.

"Well?" he said. "What's your opinion now?"

I told him, as baldly as I could, the conclusions I'd come to.

"Good," he approved. "And—?" He cocked his head.

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, leave, of course. Return these borrowed bodies to their original owners—"

Carmen gave a stifled exclamation, and he turned to her. "Yes, that's right," he said. "David was telling the truth when he warned you I was not your brother. Don't worry! The idea will seem less alarming soon. Next time you see this face, Hermanos Iglesias will be back in possession of it!" He gave a pleasant chuckle that took all the eldritch implications from the words.

"But—you mean you're *just* going to leave? You're not going to do anything with what you've learned?

"It's not up to us to do anything," he said. Suddenly he was as stern as a judge, and he no longer seemed to be a mere young man, slim, lightly built, quiet-voiced. "It's entirely up to you. There will be no more monsters in the sky when we have gone. There will be no more people who look like people and are not. We shall wait. You must act. If you want to. You may not want to. You may be happy in your

little puddle. But in that case there will be no more flights to the stars to feed your vanity. You will be too afraid."

"Act!" I cried. "How? Tell us how!"

"Why should I? Work it out! After all, we didn't wish this fate on you. You brought it on yourselves."

"What did we do?"

"That we will never tell you—*human*. You seem to have forgotten; if you hadn't, we would prevent you from returning to us by closing the only possible path. We who have not forgotten will keep the memory to ourselves, for if you learn what you did you may be tempted to do it again."

There was a silence that embraced him, me, Carmen; the priest had gone bustling to talk with believers in the departing crowd. Yet it seemed to smother the world.

Hermanos broke it. He clapped me on the arm and gave a broad grin. "Even if we won't help you can be certain we won't hinder you. You've improved since we last saw you, you know. I hope very much to welcome you back with us one day."

"You don't mean *me*," I said.

"No, I don't mean you." He hesitated. "It will probably take twenty thousand years."

While I was still lost in the contemplation of two hundred centuries, he was gone.

Rousing, I looked around in amazement. Darkness had fallen, and the four pole-mounted lights at corners of the village square showed only Carmen and the last few stragglers on their way towards Quito.

"Where did he go?" I snapped at her.

"I don't know," she whispered. "David, I'm afraid! He wasn't my brother—you were right after all. But I don't see *how*, I don't *understand!*"

Beseechingly, she caught at my hand and stared up at my face as though to read an answer there.

I had nothing to say. I put my arm around her shoulders; feeling her tremble, I began automatically to follow the others on the Quito road. As soon as we had left the glare of the village's lights, we could see the stars above and—like

stars on Earth—the dozens of wavering torches that traced the road's curves.

Nervously, at intervals people raised their heads to scan the sky. But there were no angels tonight, or any other night. There was only the diamond of *Starventure,* orbiting between horizon and eclipse and glinting in the rays of the invisible sun.

A symbol of the future. A symbol of the wrong future.

I grew aware that Carmen was weeping soundlessly, like a frightened child alone in the dark. I drew her closer, wishing that I could weep too—for our lost glory and our lost conceit. We had opened Pandora's box, and all the evils had gone out into the world, and nothing was left to us but hope.

Gradually, though, as the irregular procession wound through the chilly evening, I began to think of talking to Leon in his right shape, and arguing with him, and explaining that there was work to be done, and that spark of hope flared up like one of the torches ahead, not driving back the gloom but showing at least that there was a way forward.

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