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DERELICT OF SPACE

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Was this the Enemy's subtle trap, or was this woman what she claimed to be—an Earthling frozen in suspended animation for three thousand years.

THE Prime Officer of the Galactic Interstellar Ship Pendar looked carefully at the detector-globe and frowned. "All right," he said, "I give up. What is it?"

The External Security Officer already wore a frown. "It's hard to say, sir. According to the detector, the thing is moving at three-quarters light velocity and has a mass at rest of around twelve thousand tons. Which doesn't make sense."

"Agreed," the prime said sourly. "If it's a natural body, its velocity in this sector of the Galaxy shouldn't exceed forty miles per second with reference to the Centre. If it's a ship, its velocity should be on the order of ten kilolights if it expects to get anywhere in the next couple of centuries."

The ESO, ever in agreement with his superior, nodded, too. "Right. The reason I asked your advice is that the Chief Calculator doesn't give an answer I can act on."

"Give me the CC," the Prime said.

The ESO flipped on the communicator that led to the great robot brain buried in the depths of the ship.

"Calculations reporting," said the speaker.

"What are your findings on this object?" asked the Prime, indicating the detector globe.

"I can only offer two solutions,

sir. It is either a ruse of the Great Enemy or it is an obsolete spaceship of our own."

The ESO looked at the Prime as if to say: See? Nonsense! But the Prime didn't agree. A CC didn't give nonsense answers; its answers were in accord with its data. He asked: "What is our best approach?"

"Hard to say," answered the CC candidly. "If it's an Enemy ship, we should try to get more data; if it's an obsolete ship, we can just go up and capture it."

The Prime's frown grew deeper. "But see here—if it's an Enemy, it's at our mercy; we can blast it out of space. On the other hand, even an obsolete craft would be going faster than that if its engines are in working order. If they're not, it couldn't move any faster than—say a thousand miles per second."

"You mistake my meaning, sir. By 'obsolete,' I mean that the ship is conceivably three thousand years old. And since this is actually more probable than the other assumption, our best and most favourable action would be a spiral approach. I'll give you the figures if you want them."

The Prime only hesitated a moment. "Very well. If it's an Enemy ship, it would be better for us to die than to let a trick of any kind pass us by."

"Very well, sir." The CC began feeding its calculations into the control mechanisms of the ship.

No ship travelling at less than light velocity can detect a ship travelling at ultralight velocities. The GIS Pendar approached the oddly-moving body without the slightest resistance.

It was an artificially-constructed body, all right—a long, cigar-shaped thing. It took a lot of manoeuvring on the part of the Pendar to match the strange ship's velocity, because the Pendar wasn't built for such intermediate speeds.

When they were finally floating in space alongside the hulk, the Prime Officer sent a full-armed party of Space Marines aboard. They found a tomb.

"It's an old ship all right," said the External Security Officer, who had led the party. "Take a look at this." He held out a photostat of a plaque they had found inside the craft.

The Prime looked at it and then looked at the ESO. "What does it mean?"

"According to the Chief Calculator, it says THIRD INTERSTELLAR EXPEDITION. It's written in ancient Earth English."

"English!" The Prime looked baffled. "Why the thing must be at least three thousand years old!"

"Older, maybe. And there are eight hundred bodies aboard, all frozen solid!"

It was the labs on Kelivar IV that got the ship. There was a lot of wrangling at first, but when the Government declared it a non-military project, all the first three classes of research-teams were automatically dropped from consideration.

Kelivar IV held the best anthropological lab in the Galaxy. It was situated on the planet's equatorial land-mass near the Kespian sea; it was the best, but it had to be satisfied with fourth-class equipment. Anthropology didn't rate very high in the military estimate of sciences necessary for the War Effort.

Dr. Layson Gell was waiting for the ancient ship when it was brought

into an orbit around Kelivar IV. When the communicator notified him that it had arrived, he signalled for a flitter to take him up to it, and then turned to Captain Linstet, the military officer assigned to the lab. "She's up there. Want to go with me?"

Linstet nodded. "Definitely, although I don't see any purpose in your going by yourself."

"Preliminary survey," Gell said. Then he grinned. "Besides, I'm not going by myself; you're coming."

Linstet grinned sourly. "What significance, if any, do you attach to the appearance of this ship at this time?"

Gell shook his head. "None—at least not so far. It will take a thorough investigation of the ship to decide whether anything subtle is being pulled on us."

"Isn't it better to assume—"

"No dammit, it isn't better to assume anything," Gell said sharply. "This may be an Enemy device, and it may not; they may know what we're going to do about it, and they may not. But the probability-readings are too much to ignore. Look at it this way: If that's any Enemy device we can destroy it before it can do any widespread harm—that is, assuming it's a physical threat.

"If it's a psychological threat of immediate nature, we can get rid of it in the same way. On the other hand, if it's a psychological time-fuse, set to do us the maximum amount of harm at some unknown time in the future, there's nothing we can do about it."

The captain looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

Gell shrugged. "I mean that if we can't figure it out between now and the time it's supposed to act, our Psychological Warfare Department—and our science of psychology—is so far behind theirs that we'd lose anyway."

Linstet's expression showed he didn't like that philosophy of warfare, but he had no argument to counter Gell's reasoning.

The flitter's call-signal notified the two men that it had landed on the roof. They left Gell's office and took

the lifter to the top without saying another word to each other.

D.R. GELL guided the flitter skilfully through the planet's shimmering ionosphere, and on into the relatively-empty vacuum above.

The ancient ship was floating in a nearly-circular orbit that held it stationary above a single spot on the surface of Kelivar IV, since the time required for the ship to make one revolution in its orbit was exactly equal to the time required for the planet to make one rotation on its axis.

Gell matched velocities and looked out the plate at the hulk. He knew that the faint, glittering sparks in the distance were the two cruisers assigned to guard the relic, but he paid them little attention; the signals from his own flitter had identified him automatically.

The old ship, up close, didn't look so bad after all. The surface had been roughed up quite a bit by the particles of interstellar dust that had hit her at point-seven-five light-year velocity during her long voyage; but they had been atomic size and had hit her evenly without gouging holes. The surface was simply a dead grey in colour.

Gell wondered fleetingly how thick the outer hull had been to begin with. The military escort had reported that the ship was at least three thousand years old, but Gell suspected that was an underestimate.

Carefully, he moved the little flitter toward the airlock of the ancient vessel. "All right, Linstet, let's go."

He put on his own suit while the captain dressed, and the two of them walked into the silent hulk.

Gell noticed that the fingers of Linstet's right hand were contracting spasmodically near his hip. The captain was used to boarding dead hulks with the idea that there might—just accidentally might—be a living member of the Enemy aboard. There never had been; no prisoners had ever been captured in the long history of the war—but that didn't keep the captain from being jumpy.

Gell was grinning when he suddenly realised that his own right hand

was clenched tightly into a fist, and he knew that he was wishing for a gun himself.

"Was there any air in this thing when they found it?" Linstet asked. His voice was calm in spite of the tension.

Gell shook his head. "No, not according to the Pendar's report. Whether it leaked out gradually over the years, or was released accidentally, is something we'd like to know."

The long, metallic corridors, lit only by the moving spots from the two men's light-beams, brought a phrase to Gell's mind: "hollow echoes." That's what they should have heard, had there been any atmosphere to carry echoes.

There was nothing living aboard the ship; the biometers had shown that. But, according to the report of the CC, there were eight hundred potentially-living things aboard. Gell and Linstet headed toward the compartment where these things were.

It wasn't large. The white, marble-like blocks which encased the bodies were in rows in a compartment about forty feet long. Not much space for eight hundred people.

The room was cold, naturally, as a room exposed to the near-absolute zero of interstellar space would be. But Gell noticed that each block was surrounded by tiny coils.

Refrigeration, in case of accidental temperature rise, he thought.

Linstet ran a gloved hand over one of the incredibly-cold blocks. "You can't see anything but white stuff. How do you know they're inside there?"

"Protein analysis with subetherics. At least I assume so; I'll have a check run, of course, but I imagine the CC of the Pendar was pretty thorough on that point." He paused a moment, looking up and down the rows of silent white blocks. "I wonder where they were headed—and why?" he asked softly.

Linstet shrugged. "What I'd like to know is why they're still here. Why didn't they land?"

"Let's look around," Gell answered. It was a good three hours before they finally discovered what had run

the ancient ship off its course. Some of cosmic dust had hit the belly of the Pendar was pretty thorough on have been very big, not at the rate the ship was moving, for its entrance was marked by a sharply-outlined hole the size of a man's thumb. But the damage it had done was all out of proportion to its size. The little bit of debris, and the metal of the hull it had punched out, had vaporized within the ship; at that temperature, it had wrecked one whole section of the vessel.

It was impossible to tell, from the remains, what mechanisms had been housed there; but it was obvious that the slight impact of the little mote of dust had been the cause of the ship's wayward course.

A fraction of an inch off-course seems small, but at interstellar distances it can mean that a ship passes its destination billions of miles away.

After a thorough examination, Gell and Linstet headed back toward the airlock. "Is that all you wanted to look at?" Linstet asked cautiously.

Gell glanced at him. "I can't tell much on a preliminary survey; I just came up here to see what questions we should ask this hulk."

"Did you get the same questions I did?"

Gell turned and looked at the interior of the ship. "I think so. Didn't you think there was something odd about the instruments and things aboard?"

Linstet nodded. "I didn't recognise a damned one of them!"

CHAPTER TWO

GELL looked around the table, and thought, Only seven of us.

It wasn't much of an investigating crew; not nearly what he needed. The Military had called off three of his best men in the past fifty days, channeling their efforts to "more productive work." Meaning, of course, armaments.

Luckily, the men remaining were good men. If the Military chose men by their intelligence or experience, it would have been a different story.

But they wanted technicians and psychologists; they had no use for archeologists.

He wished they'd call Linstet off; it seemed a waste of military power to keep him here. It wasn't that Gell didn't like the man; Linstet was a nice guy and didn't try to throw his weight around. But Gell didn't see why they'd left him and taken Crosell, for example. Crosell was no genius, but he was a hell of a good technician.

One of the men at the table, Kreyman, spoke: "Dr. Gell, if you're ready, I have a preliminary report."

Kreyman will be the next to go. Gell thought. He knows too much psychology. He switched on the recorder and nodded. "Go ahead, Dr. Kreyman."

Kreyman, a smallish man with the bright golden hair typical of the Mel-don planets, began to read off the report in a low voice. "The Military engineers, after a thorough examination of the equipment aboard the ship, have agreed with us that it is necessary to determine the approximate era to which the ship belongs.

"Radiocarbon analysis of the organic components aboard the vessel help to bracket its age, but not with the usual accuracy because of the long exposure of the ship to cosmic radiation. However, within the limits of error, the date is assumed to be between three thousand eight hundred and four thousand two hundred years ago. This is within plus or minus five per cent.

"Anthropologically, however, we can narrow that down a bit."

He looked at Gell, who nodded approval, and continued, "Our knowledge of the beginning of the human race goes back only as far as Earth, the original planet from which man sprang. Sol III, however, was the first victim of the Great Enemy; it was rendered unfit for human life at some time between four and five thousand years ago. Co-ordinating the two data, we can see that the first attack and the launching of this ship can be pinpointed within two centuries.

"Within the ship are eight hundred human beings in a state of suspended

animation, frozen in blocks of ethylene glycol, and kept below sixty degrees absolute. Unfortunately, the mechanism for thawing them was either destroyed by the collision with the dust-mote or is out of order and unrecognisable. It is suggested, therefore, that this group select one of the passengers at random and attempt to revive him.

"If the attempt is successful, we believe that vital information for the War Effort will be obtained." Kreyman paused again, and looked up. "The report is signed by every member of the group."

Gell said, "For the record, Dr. Kreyman, have we any way of knowing whether the passengers are still alive?"

Kreyman shook his head. "None. It all depends on whether they were frozen quickly enough, and whether they have suffered any danger during the trip. The only way we can find out is to thaw them out."

"I see." Gell paused a moment for effect. He wanted the record to sound impressive to the Military.

Then: "Very well, Dr. Kreyman; we will select our subject."

IN order to be absolutely impartial, the block was chosen by subjecting the whole lot to probability analysis. They had to select the one person who was, at the same time, most likely to be alive and least likely to be of any importance in the ship's crew. They didn't want to experiment on vital personnel.

It was a woman. Her number was 224 according to the plaque on the plastic-encased block, but who she was they did not know. The hard vacuum of space had long since reduced the ship's log to dust through dehydration.

Gell ordered the opaque white block to be transported to the cold labs on the planet's nearest moon. The first job was to get the frozen ethylene glycol off her. They couldn't figure any way to reduce the whole mass to a liquid at three forty-eight point five degrees absolute without drowning the girl. They had to chop off all the excess without thawing the human being in-

side, and they had to do it without chipping any flesh off. It was going to be a damned delicate proposition.

"We'll use the surgical midgits," Gell decided; "we can get better control that way."

Dr. Kreyman grinned. "I always knew you were a chiseler. Now we'll have proof of it."

Gell lifted an imperious eyebrow. "I'll have you know, sir, that I am that peculiar paradox of virtue, a good chiseler."

"Oh, sure, but you're a bad influence."

"How so?"

"You're going to make chiselers out of the rest of us."

Gell winced. "I surrender; let's get started before the Military changes our minds for us."

In the control-room of the cold lab, Gell assigned the positions. "I'll take One; Kreyman will take Two; Goss, take Three; Helmer, Five; Rums, Six; and Thorbin, you take Seven. I wish we could have the other three positions filled, but we haven't the men. Let's go."

Each of the men fitted himself into the intricate controls of the work-robots. Hands and arms went into gloves; legs and feet went into boots; the torso was fitted with special close-fitting garments. And, last of all, they donned the helmets.

When the men were finally completely encased in the controls, Gell gave the signal that switched the work-robots into life. From that minute on, every movement that each man made would be relayed to the supralloy nerves of the midget under his control, and each bit of sensory information received by the robot would be returned to the man at the controls. The all-important helmet fed and relayed sight, sound and tactile sensations back and forth—as though the wearer was actually experiencing the same thing the midget did.

So closely co-ordinated were the two, that the operator got the eerie feeling that he actually was the robot; the feeling was especially weird because the robots were only a foot high.

They were delicate in appearance only; the tiny fingers, arms and legs, although only a sixth the size of a normal adult's, could exert, through their supralloy muscles, a force nearly twice that of human muscles. And yet, the microfine nervous system had all the delicacy of control of a surgeon's. And that was as it should be, for the robots were primarily used for surgical work. An eye-operation is much easier if the eye seems to be seven inches across to the surgeon.

Gell adjusted himself to the robot to get the feel of it, and then—

He strode across the scaffolding which had been erected around the white block that now loomed hugely in his eyes because of his reduced viewpoint.

The other six simalcra, identifiable only by the small number on the front and the big number on the back, followed him to the scaffold. They stopped at the foot of the great block.

"There she is," he said, "forty feet of statue to chisel out of her tomb."

Number Two's voice came. "I get to clean out her toes."

But Kreyman's light-heartedness didn't carry conviction.

IT took time. With jack-hammer and chisel, the seven tiny robots chipped and hacked at the ethylene glycol ice that surrounded the girl. The outer layers came off easily, but the closer they got to the hard, frozen tissues of the girl's body, the more careful they had to be. One slip of a hammer, one misstep with a chisel, and they could break a piece of flesh from her white, marble-hard body. And the hole that was left would be a bleeding wound when the body thawed.

It took thirty hours of delicate work before the woman was completely free of the frozen preservative that surrounded her.

"All right," said Gell at last, "now comes the hard part."

The work thus far had been physically tiring, but from now on it would be nerves that were going to be overworked. Could the girl be thawed properly? And, if so, would she live? And if she didn't? They didn't like to

think about that. If she didn't live, it might be because the freezing-process four thousand years before had been at fault. Or something during the intervening period might have upset the immobilised body processes enough to cause death.

But there was always the possibility that the men who had brought her out of her frozen state had erred.

There was one other thing. If she lived, would she be sane? Brain-tissue is easily damaged and impossible to heal; her whole nervous-system might be irreparably damaged by some small thing that muscles, blood and connective tissue could take in their stride.

Still, it had to be done. Looking at it callously, they had eight hundred bodies to experiment with. If one went wrong, they had more; they could kill seven and still be within less than one per cent. error. But even Linstet didn't like the statistics of "one per cent. error." As a military man, he could calmly face the possible death of eighty per cent. of a fleet attacking the Great Enemy, but this was, as he put it, "like cutting a man's throat while he's asleep in his own home."

They used the man-sized robots this time. Very carefully, they laid the girl's white, hard, frozen body inside the coils of an induction-heater. Again the situation was ticklish. They couldn't, obviously, put her in a warm room to do the thawing. If they did, the surface layers of her flesh might warm up too much before they got her ready for the induction-heating.

On the other hand, they couldn't thaw her in a room with a temperature of some sixty degrees absolute; one breath, and she'd die. The helium atmosphere wasn't poisonous, but it was deadly cold.

THEY finally settled on a small, insulated case which would be flooded with warm oxygen a half-second before the inductors went on.

"I don't understand," Captain Linstet said puzzledly. "She won't thaw below two seventy six absolute, and she could stand that after you warmed her."

His voice came from the robot standing next to Gell as the girl was

being encased in the special cell. Gell started to reply, but Dr. Kreyman took the explanation on himself. "It's a matter of ice-formation in the cells. There is more than one kind of frozen water, you see. The formula for water is generally given as H_2O , but that's not accurate. Even liquid water has a formula something like H_{1206} . The crystalline structures of ices vary according to the temperatures and pressures to which they are subjected.

"If allowed to freeze normally, the cells of a human body are ruptured by the expansion of the ice as it freezes. But the type of ice in these tissues isn't crystalline; it's glass. In other words, the water in her body isn't frozen, in the normal sense of the word; it's a supercooled liquid.

"If she's still alive, her body hasn't really been frozen; it's simply been slowed down. But if we were to warm her above sixty absolute, that supercooled liquid would freeze into a crystalline solid and kill her instantly. So what we have to do is get her body up to normal so fast that the water hasn't time to go through the freezing stage. See?"

The captain nodded.

By this time, the girl's body was ready. The capsule was sealed, and the necessary equipment was taped to her—heart exciter, adrenelin-injector, and so on; all the apparatus that would be needed to change the cold, white thing in the capsule to a living, breathing woman.

"Ready?" asked Gell.

"Ready," came the ragged chorus.

"Let her go," Gell said softly.

The induction coils flashed briefly, but even before they had ceased to glow, the stiff, marble-like thing before them had softened into human flesh. The heart-exciter took over.

Gell watched the instruments tensely.

Ka-pum — ka-pum — ka-pum — ka-pum —

The heart was beating, but not of its own accord. It was only a throb induced by the regular pulses of the exciter.

Ka-pum — ka-pum — ka-pum —

Gell pushed a switch, and the adrenelin-hypo shot its heavy dosage into the inert girl.

Ka-pum — ka-pum — KA-KA-PUM — KA-KA-PUM —

"Double beat! Cut the exciter!"

Ka-pum — ka-pum — ka-pum —

The heart was beating by itself! "She's alive," Captain Linstet said softly. "Four thousand years old, and she's alive!"

CHAPTER THREE

SHE didn't become conscious for three hours. By that time they had transferred her to the station hospital on Kelivar IV.

When she did awaken, her method of doing so was not quite normal. One minute she was quite unconscious—then, quite suddenly, her eyes were open and she was looking at them. She smiled; her lips moved and she spoke.

Gell smiled back. "We can't understand you, I'm afraid. We can read and write ancient English, but we don't know how it was spoken."

The girl frowned slightly and sat up in bed. She looked carefully at the seven members of the research team and at Captain Linstet in his dull, metal-grey uniform. Then she smiled again, nodding. Again her speech was unintelligible.

Kreyman, the only one of the seven who could call himself fluent in writing English, had an electrowriter ready. He looked at Gell.

"Ask her what her name is," Gell said.

Kreyman wrote, and the girl looked at the panel. She nodded and stretched out her hands. Kreyman relinquished the keys. "My name is Ledora Mayne," she wrote.

They told her—in part—who they were, and for a good half hour, they exchanged information of the commonplace type.

Gell noticed that she watched his lips when he spoke, and he began to feel that she wasn't really answering his questions.

Then, suddenly, she grinned. "I see that a slight change in vowel-values and syllabic stress has taken place, but the structure of the language has remained essentially the same.

"Now I would like some information: how long have I been under?"

There was a long silence. The girl's speaking had been entirely unexpected. Then Gell said: "We had thought that the period was about four thousand years, but it seems we were mistaken."

Her smile was still there. "You mean because I'm speaking your language? I see." Her voice dropped a little, and her face clouded. "Then the attack was successful. You people are descendants of the Sirius or Alpha Centauri expeditions." Then her eyes glowed with great joy. "And you have discovered the great secret of the interstellar drive!"

Shocked, Linstet stood up. "Who are you?" he asked in a savage voice. "If you think you can fool us with that line of hogwash, you're completely mistaken!"

The girl looked directly at him, then, and all the internal brilliance of her personality seemed to radiate from her like the light from a sun. And, like that light, the energy that showed on the surface was obviously only a fraction of what seethed beneath. "My dear sir," she said, her voice soft and vibrant, "I have no intention of feeding you hogwash. I see that you are quite unable to grasp the meaning of what I have said. Therefore, I will have to explain.

"I think, however, that it could be better, psychologically, to wait until you have had time to assimilate it yourself."

Then she turned to look at Gell. "I wonder if I could have something to eat. I assure you that I have no intention of saying anything until I have been fed."

Gell looked at her for a long second, and then nodded. "I can see you mean it. Very well; we will see that you are fed. We will come back in an hour."

LINSTET stood in the centre of the room and glared at the scientists assembled around Gell's desk. "Let me question her," he said angrily. "I'll find out what sort of trickery she's up to!"

Gell patted the air with a hand. "Simmer down, Captain. We can't at-

tack the problem that way; you're sore because she's insulted you."

"What do you propose to do, then?" Linstet's voice was heavy with suppressed emotion.

"I propose," Gell said evenly, "that we use the scientific method. We get facts, compose a hypothesis, test the hypothesis, and modify it in the light of new facts received—"

"That's all very well," Linstet's voice cut in acidly, "but we don't have any facts; I want to get them from her. If this is an Enemy psychological device, as I suspect it to be, we have to have facts."

"But we do have facts." Gell emphasised the point by tapping his forefinger on the desk top. "Consider: we have here a woman who, according to our best tests, is a human being who has been frozen in a state of suspended animation for four thousand years. Upon awakening, she is able to speak modern Galactic after listening to us talk for a little while and comparing our spoken words with what is written in ancient English."

Linstet nodded. "Which shows it's a trick; nobody could learn that fast."

"I'll agree that it could be a trick. But if it is, it's either very crude or very subtle. Remember what she said? I see that you are quite unable to grasp the meaning of what I said. You took it as an insult, but she didn't say it that way; she merely stated a fact.

"Let's take another tack. You noticed the girl's personality, I'm sure. It's so alive it's breathtaking; as a matter of fact, she frightened you a little."

One of the other men spoke up. "She frightened me a little, too, Dr. Gell."

Gell nodded in agreement. "Now suppose she had an intelligence to match that personality—which is, of course, a logical necessity."

The others were silent for a moment, then Kreyman said: "In that case, I see no reason why she could not have deduced the pronunciation of our language with the few clues given her—especially since she already knew the basic language."

"Exactly," said Gell. "And the

reason which we have so laboriously gone through would have flashed through her mind—or any other mind with her IQ immediately.”

Captain Linstet frowned. “You mean to her we’re just a bunch of idiots?”

Kreyman answered the question. “Not precisely; intelligence can’t be compared that way. An animal, for instance, cannot ever know that a human being is more intelligent; the concept never occurs to an animal. A human idiot realises dimly that normal people can ‘think better’ than he can. But only dimly.

“But a normal human being has reached the stage of intelligence which enables him to define, at least in part, what intelligence is. That girl’s thinking processes are faster than ours, and she requires less data to compute with, but her answers are not necessarily any better than ours.”

“You said, ‘not necessarily,’” Linstet pointed out. “Don’t you think it’s possible that they could be?”

“Possible? Yes, definitely,” agreed Kreyman. “But we don’t dare act on that basis, or we’re licked from the start. If we don’t assume that our thinking is just as reliable as hers—even though it’s more ponderous—we won’t be able to use the answers we do get.”

“But she can think faster, and—”
“A robot can think faster, too.” Kreyman pointed out; “but it gets the same answer a human would get when the human is given enough time.”

“All right,” Linstet sighed heavily, “I don’t like it, but I’ll go along with you; what’s our next step?”

“We have formed a theory,” said Dr. Gell. “The next step is to get more facts.”

ONE of the nurses had given Ledora Mayne some clothing, and she was sitting in a chair sipping hot spice-brew from a cup when Kreyman and Gell entered.

Linstet and the others had agreed to stay in the control-office and watch the scene through the visors. “And remember,” Gell had warned, “she’ll probably figure she’s being watched,

so don’t be surprised at anything she says—or doesn’t say. We don’t know how many jumps ahead of us she is.”

Ledora Mayne looked up at them and smiled. “You know?”

The two men seated themselves. Gell said: “We think we know, but we’d like to hear your explanation.”

“Certainly. I presume there is a great deal of Earth’s history that you don’t know?”

She gave it the inflection of a question, but it was obviously a statement of fact.

She’s trying not to make us feel inferior, Gell thought. Aloud he said: “Very little. Our ancestors, as you said left Earth about five thousand years ago. We have, you will notice, preserved the Earth year as a standard.

“The first colony, on Sirius V, did not know, of course, of the existence of the second colony on Altair III; and it was about a thousand years later that the Altairians had progressed far enough to build a sublight drive that would take them to Sirius. The Sirians had worked on the problem along a different line, and within a short time the first ultralight ship was built. At about that time, the planets of both suns were attacked by the Great Enemy; but we managed to stop the attack before any great damage was done.

“Since then, we have expanded over a quarter of the Galaxy. We found Earth, but it was a radioactive ruin.” He paused, looking steadily at the girl. “Suppose you take it from there.”

“Very well,” she said in her vibrant voice. “The first two expeditions were one-way shots, as you know. Their velocity was about a quarter that of light, and the high-velocity energy-transfer method of quick-freezing was unknown then; so it was the second generation of colonists that landed.

“Now the Khethani have—”

“The who?” asked Kreyman sharply.

“You call them the Great Enemy; they call themselves the Khethani.”

“You’ve met them?” his voice was incredulous. “What—”

"Let me finish, please; you can ask questions then. The Khethani have a method of detecting large material bodies, moving at velocities greater than twenty thousand miles per second.

"WE didn't realise they were looking for us until they had actually landed on Earth. It seems that the lower the velocity, the more difficult it is to pinpoint the position of the body in space. They combed that area of the Galaxy of the body in space. They combed that area of the Galaxy for years before they found Earth: but by then, both of the original colonial ships had arrived at their destinations.

"The Khethani are supreme egoists. The very thought of another race attempting to colonise the Galaxy was supremely abhorrent to them; so they took over Earth.

"However they made one mistake. Before they attacked, they broadcast an ultimatum. 'Tell us where the colonists went—or else.' She shrugged a little. "It was foolish of them; human beings are egoists, too. All information leading to Sirius and Altair was destroyed. The few people who knew the secret destinations of the ships submitted to partial amnesia treatment. By the time the Khethani had conquered us, the knowledge of the colonists' whereabouts had been effectively covered."

"Just a moment," interrupted Gell. "Altair and Sirius are only a few light-years from Earth. Why didn't they search?"

The girl looked at him. "They did not know either the exact velocity or directions of the ships. They knew only that the colonists were within a fifty light-year radius of Sol. That's a big volume of space to cover; it contains a good many planets. Add, too, the fact that it takes time and men to search an earth type-planet for a few hundred people."

"But they could have done it; why didn't they?"

"I'm coming to that. The first thing they did—before they struck Earth—was to put up a subetheric interfer-

ence-screen around the Solar system. They didn't know that the subradio had been discovered after the colonists left, and they hoped that the new colonies would eventually put in a call to Earth.

"Therefore, they clamped tight controls on Earth. They took away all of our atomic plants, our spaceports, everything. They absolutely forbade any technological experimentation anywhere; our books were burnt, our colleges and universities destroyed, and our government scattered.

"Then the Khethani sat down to wait.

"There was only one thing that saved us—or rather, one man. Edouard Sessen, Earth's finest Psychologist. He had perfected what is now known as the Sessen system of mind-control, which allows human beings to use the full potentialities of their brains.

"It was kept secret, of course, from the invaders, and through it, we kept our technology. In my own memory alone, I have a catalogue of over thirty thousand books.

"Even with that, it was a race against time. We built a fleet of a thousand ships—secretly. Each was to hold eight hundred people. But at about the same time, the Khethani began to realise that the colonists would never contact Earth; they decided to destroy us."

THE girl paused to take a sip from her cup, then she continued quietly. "We had perfected a device which would blanket the Khethani velocity-detectors, so that our ships couldn't be found, even if they were moving at seventy-five percent light-velocity.

"We didn't know the direction of the Khethani planets from Earth, so the destination of each ship was different. We picked distant stars, all over twenty-five hundred light-years from Sol. We took off just a few hours before the intended attack on Earth."

She stopped still smiling, and Gell realised with a slight shock that her story was finished.

He broke the silence. "After the

destruction of Earth, they still had a thousand years to find the colonies. Why is it they didn't?"

"I can only guess, but I should say it was because they discovered that our fleet had taken off. This would indicate, to their peculiar minds, that they had underestimated our intelligence and that we could outwit them. They knew that if we could hide a thousand-ship fleet on Earth, our colonists could certainly hide out in the stars."

"Then why were we attacked as soon as we used a sublight drive?"

She looked thoughtful. "Again, this is only a guess, but I'll give you my analysis for what it is worth."

"First, if they knew we had a detector-blanket, they would assume our superiority. Then, when the first Altairian ship took off at sublight velocity, without the detector-blanket, they sent a small task-force, assuming it might be a trap. When the Sirian ultralight ships took off to fight back, they were sure it was a trap."

"Thus convinced of the superiority of the human race, they have contented themselves with expansion only in their own section of the Galaxy. They are egoists, yes, but they are also realists."

"But that's ridiculous!" exploded Kreyman. "We have been fighting them to a stalemate over fifty thousand light-year front for over three thousand years! We've fought tooth and nail to hold them to a standstill!"

Her smile changed then, and it was the soft smile that one would smile at a child. "I'm afraid they don't look at it that way. They are merely protecting themselves, and they assume you are doing the same. They assume that humans are realists, too; they would look on that front as a sort of mutually agreed-upon border. They patrol their side, you patrol yours."

"What you consider to be a 'tooth and nail' struggle for existence is assumed to be merely border skirmishes by the Khethani. If they knew you were fighting with everything you've got, they would have invaded long ago."

THE silence was thick and tense in the room. Kreyman started to say something, but Gell spoke first. "I see. I would like to talk this over with my staff, if you don't mind. If you could excuse us—"

They left the room without another word. Neither spoke until they reached the control-office where the others were waiting. "Well," said Gell then, "what did you think of that?"

Captain Linstet was the first to speak. He was smiling, but there was a trace of bitterness in it. "I told you from the beginning that it was an Enemy trick. Do they think we're fools to fall for that sort of trick? Obviously, that story is meant to demoralise us; if that girl's story were to be believed, human resistance against the Great Enemy would collapse."

Gell nodded slowly. "True. I'm sure we all felt the shock when she said it."

"Do you believe it? Linsett asked, narrowing his eyes."

Gell stared into space for a long time, then he turned slowly to face Linstet again. "I don't know," he said softly. "I realise there's very little evidence to back up her story. But the way she says it! Not the words, but the personality underneath! You've got to admit she's very convincing."

"Not to me, she isn't," Linstet said, his voice hard. "I'll admit she frightens me—but it's the same fright I feel when I see an Enemy ship. It makes me want to fight. What do you intend to do next, Dr. Gell?"

Before Gell could answer, Kreyman said. "There's a way her story could be proved."

They all looked at him expectantly.

"She made a statement," Kreyman went on, "about something which she called the Sessen system of mind-control. She said that it was the system which gave her her present mental equipment. We can assume that any normal human being could learn it; all we have to do to prove her story is to ask her to teach us the method."

"Why, yes," Gell said excitedly, "we can—"

"No!" Captain Linstet's voice crackled across the room. "Can't you fools see that that's part of the trap? You all know that under hypnosis the

mind possesses abnormal powers. That girl has been hypnotised by the Enemy! If you get her to teach you this mind control system of hers, you'll be in the same fix she is in! I say no!"

"We can test that," said Kreyman. "We can find out whether she's hypnotised or not, and we can test her intelligence. In order for her to be as intelligent as she seems, she would have to run every one of our tests perfectly."

"Very well," agreed Gell. "Prepare your tests; we'll see if we can find something that way."

Captain Linstet sighed. "I'm sorry to have to do this gentlemen; I never thought I'd have to. But a psychological trap is like a disease; it can spread. From now on, no one sees that girl, no one talks to her."

"As of this moment, this station and everyone in it are under Military Law!"

There was an excited garble of voices from the seven scientists, then Dr. Gell's voice cut through. "Just a minute! The captain is perfectly within his rights! But—" He turned toward Linstet. "—may I ask why?"

"Logic," said Linstet tightly. "We don't know what kind of damage that girl can do, but we do know one thing: if she had never been discovered, we would be no worse off than before. I am going to see to it that the ship is destroyed, the girl killed, and all knowledge of what she said wiped from our minds."

GELL and Kreyman looked at each other across the table in the station cafeteria. Gell said: "Linstet says he has requested that the ship be loaded with explosives and blown up. He wants to make sure of its total destruction."

"He'll do it, too," Kreyman said sarcastically; "he's a manly little fellow."

Gell rubbed a hand across his tired eyes. "Don't blame him. It's the way his mind is built to function: don't take a chance unless you have to. At least he hasn't ordered the Space Marines in to enforce his orders; we're on our honour."

"Sure, sure," nodded Kreyman.

"And the battle cruiser Rayvon is floating up in the stratosphere, ready to bomb the whole station out of existence if he gives the word."

"I know; I know. If only we could save the girl."

"How?" He's got that whole hallway guarded, and he has a man on a spy-screen twenty-four hours a day. He won't even let anyone in there to feed her. I think he's even afraid to send someone in to kill her."

"I think he—shh! Here he comes!"

Captain Linstet strode across the room toward the two men, ignoring the glares he was getting from the crowd at the tables. "Dr. Gell," he said crisply, "I wonder if you'd come up to my office for a few minutes? I have a report to make out, and I'd like to get your personal opinion on this matter."

"Certainly," Gell said stiffly. He rose and followed Linstet out of the cafeteria. They took on elevator to the upper floor where the Military Office was located.

"Just a minute," Linstet said, stopping at the door of one of the rooms, "I want to see what the girl is doing."

Inside, a young officer was idly watching the screen.

"What's she doing?" Linstet asked, crossing the room.

"Nothing much, sir; she's been staring out the window for the past hour."

Linstet took one look at the screen, then turned savagely on the younger man. "Lieutenant! Have you gone mad? Where is the girl?"

As Gell walked toward them, he could see the young officer's face turn white. "Why, she's right there, sir!" He pointed a finger at the screen. "Sitting right there by the window!"

Gell looked at the screen, at the spot where the lieutenant's finger was pointed. There was nothing there; the room was empty.

Before Linstet could say anything further, Gell said: "Leave him alone, Captain, he's been hypnotised."

IT was better than thirty minutes before they got the whole story. Somehow, Ledora Mayne had hypnotised the watching officer through the screen, and then calmly walked out

of the door of her cell. The electro-lock was still functioning perfectly; but it hadn't stopped the Earth girl.

The guards in the halls had seen no one leave; they had been hypnotised, too.

And now where was she?

Linstet put out a general alarm for the girl, and he and Gell waited in his office for news.

A communicator signalled. "Captain Linstet? Prime Officer Dorf is waiting."

Linstet looked at the screen. "Put him on."

The spaceman's face smiled from the screen. "The old ship is mined and ready to go, Captain; would you like to watch the explosion?"

Linstet nodded, and the view in the screen suddenly switched to a view of the hulk floating in space.

"Here she goes!" said the unseen officer's voice. The screen was suddenly lit with the awful glare of atomic detonation.

Linstet thanked the officer and cut the connection. "Well, that's part of the job. But what about the girl?"

"She's got to be somewhere on the planet," Gell mused. He walked over to the window and looked at the sky. High above, he could still see the dying glow of the exploding spaceship.

"How can we find her?" Linstet asked. "If she can hypnotise a man that easily, no search-party could bring her in."

"I agree," Gell's voice was low. "She could be standing in this room with us now, and we wouldn't know it."

Linstet felt an icy tingle up his back and turned completely around—slowly. He saw only the normal walls of the room, but he knew that meant nothing.

"All right," he said to Gell, "we'll do a little of your theorising. Where would she logically go? What would she do?"

"That depends. Are we to assume that she is an Enemy agent, or do we assume that she was telling the truth? Or something else?"

"Let us assume," Linstet said deliberately, "that she is an enemy

alien, but grant her the intelligence that we originally supposed her to have. Now where would she go?"

"Why, then," said Gell in an odd voice. "Why, then, I suppose I would go to the battle cruiser that was supposed to blow up the old ship."

Captain Linstet's face blanched as he leaped to the communicator again. His first call was to the spaceport.

"Why no, sir," said the man at the other end. "There are no flitters missing—except of course, the one you borrowed two hours ago."

"That wasn't me! That was the girl!" He switched the man off before he had a chance to say anything. Then he tried to get the Rayvon; she wouldn't respond, so he called the other battle cruiser.

"The Rayvon went into ultradrive immediately after the explosion, Captain. Prime Officer Dorf said that you didn't need him any more, that my own ship would be enough. Is there anything wrong, Captain?"

LINSTET sent out a Galaxy-wide alarm immediately, but the Rayvon had vanished. Days dragged into months and nothing happened. Linstet paced floors, cursed at himself, and bit his nails to the quick.

And still nothing happened.

Dr. Gell was beginning to think seriously of having the captain examined by the station psychiatrist when the break finally came.

A Special courier-ship from the secret planet which held the all-powerful Galactic Government landed at the station. A high-ranking civilian stepped out and requested that Captain Linstet, Dr. Gell, and Dr. Kreyman accompany him to the communications room.

"I have here a recording I want you to see," he said briskly. "It is a copy of an original recording brought to the Government by Prime Officer Dorf of the G.I.S. Rayvon when he was released by the Earthmen."

"Since it is addressed to you three men, the Government has asked me to play it for you. I am not at liberty to tell you what action the Government is taking, but I must warn you that if you repeat any of

the contents of this recording, it will be considered a Class One breach of security, punishable by death. Is that understood?"

It was.

"Very well, gentleman, watch."

The screen lit up. On it was the face of the Earthwoman, Ledora Mayne. She began to speak. "This is addressed primarily to the Government of the Human Galaxy, and secondarily to Captain Linstet and Doctors Gell and Kreyman of Kelivar IV.

"By this time, you know that the explosion which destroyed the ship at Kelivar took place after its occupants had been removed. You will also know that the story I told was substantially true. However, we are well aware that no human being who is unable to use the Sessen mind-control system can ever fully trust us. Therefore, we will explain exactly what we intend to do, and exactly know we intend to do it.

"Supreme Commander Grayme of the Earth Fleet will now give you the full details."

She stepped back from the screen, and her face was replaced by that of a handsome, determined-looking man who looked as though he were in his early thirties.

"In the months since Ledora Mayne was brought out of freeze," he began, in a well-modulated baritone, "we have managed to trace and revive the full eight hundred thousand Earthmen who left Earth just before the final attack of the Khethani four thousand years ago. Fortunately, none of the ships had yet reached their destinations.

"We know that you fear us, and we are sorry for that fear; we are not inhuman, and we are not agents of the Khethani.

"However, we have no alternative but to act as we are doing. Already our agents have been planted on the various planets of the Human Galaxy. Slowly and carefully, they will spread the knowledge of Sessen's system. There will be nothing you can do to stop the process, since the system can be learned very quickly, and you can

not consider high intelligence a crime.

"If you announce what I have just told you, the result will be panic, which will only serve to delay the ending of the war against the Great Enemy.

"We will not contact you again, for we will have no need to."

The screen darkened and the man's face was abruptly gone.

Linstet clenched his fists. "There's nothing we can do; absolutely nothing."

"You are not quite correct," said the Government courier. "The Government is going all-out against this sneak invasion, and our methods will improve with time."

Dr. Gell grinned sardonically. "Frankly, gentlemen, I think the Government is wasting its time."

CAPTAIN LINSTET was the only one of them who actually saw the beginning of the end.

Five years after the escape of Ledora Mayne, he was transferred, at his own request, to the front, and was upgraded in the process. He was aboard the battleship Lansen when the news came that, for the first time in the long history of the war, a ship full of live captives had been captured by the Enemy.

The Prime Officer of the Lansen looked grim as the news came over the communicator. "What do you think of it, Linstet?"

"I'd say that within forty-eight hours they will have tested the intelligence that they have been held back by their own fear for three thousand years."

"Exactly," said the Prime Officer.

Forty-eight hours later, the Khethani struck. Their fleet smashed through a weak spot in the screen of ships that protected the Human Galaxy. For twelve days, despite all the Human ships could do, the Khethani poured through that fatal gap in the defences.

Then, inexplicably, the gap closed, as though the humans had gained new strength. And the Khethani fleet met the mighty power of the Second Fleet. Cut off from their home-base by a screen of ships, and cut off

from communication by a powerful subether blanket, the Khethani fought hard—and lost. For nine days the battle raged; when it was over, the vast fleet of a million Khethani ships had been reduced to incandescent gases.

Linstet grinned when he heard the news. The Prime Officer of the Lansen grinned back.

"It worked, right on schedule. Now we start pushing the Khethani back. We haven't broken them yet, by a long shot, but we've weakened them; we'll win eventually."

Linstet nodded. "Right. And, by the way; do you remember when Dr. Gell told you that ship had taken a wayward course? He was wrong; it was we who had taken the wayward course until you came along to set as right."

Prime Officer Ledora Mayne laughed. "And you weren't going to have anything to do with us."

Linstet looked her up and down slowly. "I've changed my mind."

One hundred and forty years later, the last hostile Khethani died.

THE END.

THE CHAPTER ENDS

By POUL ANDERSON

"Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is Earth. This is the old home of all mankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever"

"NO," said the old man. "But you don't realise what it means," said Jorun. "You don't know what you're saying."

The old man, Kormt of Huerdar, Gerlaug's son, and Speaker for Solis Township, shook his head till the long, grizzled locks swirled around his wide shoulders. "I have thought it through," he said. His voice was deep and slow and implacable. "You gave me five years to think about it. And my answer is no."

Jorun felt a weariness rise within him. It had been like this for days now, weeks, and it was like trying to knock down a mountain. You beat on its rocky flanks till your hands

were bloody, and still the mountain stood there, sunlight on its high snow-fields and in the forests that rustled up its slopes, and it did not really notice you. You were a brief thin buzz between two long nights, but the mountain was forever.

"You haven't thought at all," he said with a rudeness born of exhaustion. "You've only reacted unthinkingly to a dead symbol. It's not a human reaction, even, it's a verbal reflex."

Kormt's eyes, meshed in crow's-feet, were serene and steady under the thick grey brows. He smiled a little in his long beard, but made no other reply. Had he simply let the insult glide off

him, or had he not understood it at all? There was no real talking to these peasants; too many millennia lay between, and you couldn't shout across that gulf.

"Well," said Jorun, "the ships will be here tomorrow or the next day, and it'll take another day or so to get all your people aboard. You have that long to decide, but after that it'll be too late. Think about it, I beg of you. As for me, I'll be too busy to argue further."

"You are a good man," said Kormt, "and a wise one in your fashion. But you are blind. There is something dead inside you."

He waved one huge gnarled hand. "Look around you, Jorun of Fulkhis. This is Earth. This is the old home of all humankind. You cannot go off and forget it. Man cannot do so. It is in him, in his blood and bones and bones and soul; he will carry Earth within him forever."

Jorun's eyes travelled along the arc of the hand. He stood on the edge of the town. Behind him were its houses—low, white, half-timbered, roofed with thatch or red tile, smoke rising from the chimneys; carved galleries overhung the narrow, cobbled, crazily-twisting streets; he heard the noise of wheels and wooden clogs, the shouts of children at play. Beyond that were trees and the incredible ruined walls of Sol-City. In front of him, the wooded hills were cleared and a gentle landscape of neat fields and orchards rolled down toward the distant glitter of the sea: scattered farm buildings, drowsy cattle, winding gravel roads, fence-walls of ancient marble and granite, all dreaming under the sun.

He drew a deep breath. It was pungent in his nostrils. It smelled of leaf-mould, plowed earth baking in the warmth, summery trees and gardens, a remote ocean odour of salt and kelp and fish. He thought that no two planets ever had quite the same smell, and that none was as rich as Terra's.

"This is a fair world," he said slowly.

"It is the only one," said Kormt. "Man came from here; and to this, in the end, he must return."

"I wonder—" Jorun sighed. "Take me; not one atom of my body was from this soil before I landed. My people lived on Fulkhis for ages, and changed to meet its conditions. They would not be happy on Terra."

"The atoms are nothing," said Kormt. "It is the form which matters, and that was given to you by Earth."

Jorun studied him for a moment. Kormt was like most of this planet's ten million or so people—a dark, stocky folk, though there were more blond and red-haired throwbacks here than in the rest of the Galaxy. He was old for a primitive untreated by medical science—he must be almost two hundred years old—but his back was straight, and his stride firm. The coarse, jut-nosed face held an odd strength. Jorun was nearing his thousandth birthday, but couldn't help feeling like a child in Kormt's presence.

That didn't make sense. These few dwellers on Terra were a backward and impoverished race of peasants and handicraftsmen; they were ignorant and unadventurous; they had been static for more thousands of years than anyone knew. What could they have to say to the ancient and mighty civilisation which had almost forgotten their little planet?

Kormt looked at the declining sun. "I must go now," he said. "There are the evening chores to do. I will be in town to-night if you should wish to see me."

"I probably will," said Jorun. "There's a lot to do, readying the evacuation, and you're a big help."

THE old man bowed with grave courtesy, turned, and walked off down the road. He wore the common costume of Terran men, as archaic in style as in its woven-fabric material: hat, jacket, loose trousers, a long staff in his hand. Contrasting the drab blue of Kormt's dress, Jorun's

vivid tunic of shifting rainbow hues was like a flame.

The psychotechnician sighed again, watching him go. He liked the old fellow. It would be criminal to leave him here alone, but the law forbade force—physical or mental—and the Integrator on Corazuno wasn't going to care whether or not one aged man stayed behind. The job was to get the race off Terra.

A lovely world. Jorun's thin mobile features, pale-skinned and large-eyed, turned around the horizon. A fair world we came from.

There were more beautiful planets in the Galaxy's swarming myriads—the indigo world-ocean of Loa, jewelled with islands; the heaven-defying mountains of Sharang; the sky of Jareb, that seemed to drip light—oh, many and many, but there was only one Earth.

Jorun remembered his first sight of this world, hanging free in space to watch it after the gruelling ten-day run, thirty thousand light-years, from Corazuno. It was blue as it turned before his eyes, a burnished turquoise shield blazoned with the living green and brown of its lands, and the poles were crowned with a flimmering haze of aurora. The belts that streaked its face and blurred the continents were cloud, wind and water and the grey rush of rain, like a benediction from heaven. Beyond the planet hung its moon, a scarred golden crescent, and he had wondered how many generations of men had looked up to it, or watched its light like a broken bridge across moving waters. Against the enormous cold of the sky—utter black to the distant coils of the nebulae, thronging with a million frosty points of diamond-hard blaze that were the stars—Earth had stood as a sign of haven. To Jorun, who came from Galactic Centre and its uncountable hosts of suns, heaven was bare, this was the outer fringe where the stars thinned away toward hideous immensity. He had shivered a little, drawn the envelope of air and warmth closer about him, with a convulsive movement. The silence drummed in his

head. Then he streaked for the north-pole rendezvous of his group.

Well, he thought now, we have a pretty routine job. The first expedition here, five years ago, prepared the natives for the fact they'd have to go. Our party simply has to organise these docile peasants in time for the ships. But it had meant a lot of hard work, and he was tired. It would be good to finish the job and get back home.

Or would it?

He thought of flying with Zarek, his team-mate, from the rendezvous to this area assigned as theirs. Plains like oceans of grass, wind-rippled, darkened with the herds of wild cattle whose hoofbeats were a thunder in the earth; forests, hundreds of kilometres of old and mighty trees, rivers piercing them in a long steel gleam; lakes where fish leaped; spilling sunshine like warm rain, radiance so bright it hurt his eyes, cloud-shadows swift across the land. It had all been empty of man, but still there was a vitality here which was almost frightening to Jorun. His own grim world of moors and crags and spin-drift seas was a niggard beside this; here life covered the earth, filled the oceans, and made the heavens clangerous around him. He wondered if the driving energy within man, the force which had raised him to the stars, made him half-god and half-demon, if that was a legacy of Terra.

Well—man had changed; over the thousands of years, natural and controlled adaptation had fitted him to the worlds he had colonised, and most of his many races could not now feel at home here. Jorun thought of his own party; round, amber-skinned Chuli from a tropic world, complaining bitterly about the cold and dryness, gay young Cluthe, gangling and bulge-chested; sophisticated Taliu-venna of the flowing dark hair and the lustrous eyes—no, to them Earth was only one more planet, out of thousands they had seen in their long lives.

And I'm a sentimental fool.

CHAPTER TWO

HE could have willed the vague regret out of his trained nervous system, but he didn't want to. This was the last time human eyes would ever look on Earth, and somehow Jorun felt that it should be more to him than just another psychotechnic job.

"Hello, good sir."

He turned at the voice and forced his tired lips into a friendly smile. "Hello, Julith," he said. It was a wise policy to learn the names of the townspeople, at least, and she was a great-great-granddaughter of the Speaker.

She was some 13 or 14 years old, a freckle-faced child with a shy smile, and steady green eyes. There was a certain awkward grace about her, and she seemed more imaginative than most of her stolid race. She curtsied quaintly for him, her bare foot reaching out under the long smock which was daily female dress here.

"Are you busy, good sir?" she asked.

"Well, not too much," said Jorun. He was glad of a chance to talk; it silenced his thoughts. "What can I do for you?"

"I wondered—" She hesitated, then, breathlessly: "I wonder if you could give me a lift down to the beach? Only for an hour or two. It's too far to walk there before I have to be home, and I can't borrow a car, or even a horse. If it won't be any trouble, sir."

"Mmmm—shouldn't you be at home now? Isn't there milking and so on to do?"

"Oh, I don't live on a farm, good sir. My father is a baker."

"Yes, yes, so he is. I should have remembered," Jorun considered for an instant. There was enough to do in town, and it wasn't fair for him to play hooky while Zarek worked alone. "Why do you want to go to the beach, Julith?"

"We'll be busy packing up," she said. "Starting to-morrow, I guess. This is my last chance to see it."

Jorun's mouth twisted a little. "All right," he said; "I'll take you."

"You are very kind, good sir," she said gravely.

He didn't reply, but held out his arm, and she clasped it with one hand while her other arm gripped his waist. The generator inside his skull responded to his will, reaching out and clawing itself to the fabric of forces and energies which was physical space. They rose quietly, and went so slowly seaward that he didn't have to raise a wind-screen.

"Will we be able to fly like this when we get to the stars?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, Julith," he said. "You see, the people of my civilisation are born this way. Thousands of years ago, men learned how to control the great basic forces of the cosmos with only a small bit of energy. Finally they used artificial mutation—that is, they changed themselves, slowly, over many generations, until their brains grew a new part that could generate this controlling force. We can now even fly between the stars, by this power. But your people don't have that brain, so we had to build spaceships to take you away."

"I see," she said.

"Your great-great-grandchildren can be like us, if your people want to be changed thus," he said.

"They didn't want to change before," she answered. "I don't think they'll do it now, even in their new home." Her voice held no bitterness; it was an acceptance.

Privately, Jorun doubted it. The psychic shock of this uprooting would be bound to destroy the old traditions of the Terrans; it would not take many centuries before they were culturally assimilated by Galactic civilisation.

Assimilated—nice euphemism. Why not just say—eaten?

THEY landed on the beach. It was broad and white, running in dunes from the thin, harsh, salt-streaked grass to the roar and tumble of surf. The sun was low over the

watery horizon, filling the damp, blowing air with gold. Jorun could almost look directly at its huge disc.

He sat down. The sand gritted tinily under him, and the wind rumpled his hair and filled his nostrils with its sharp wet smell. He picked up a conch and turned it over in his fingers, wondering at the intricate architecture of it.

"If you hold it to your ear," said Julith, "you can hear the sea." Her childish voice was curiously tender around the rough syllables of Earth's language.

He nodded and obeyed her hint. It was only the small pulse of blood within him—you heard the same thing out in the great hollow silence of space—but it did sing of restless immensities, wind and foam, and the long waves marching under the moon.

"I have two of them myself," said Julith. "I want them so I can always remember this beach. And my children and their children will hold them, too, and hear our sea talking." She folded his fingers around the shell. "You keep this one for yourself."

"Thank you," he said. "I will."

The combers rolled in, booming and spouting against the land. The Terrans called them the horses of God. A thin cloud in the west was turning rose and gold.

"Are there oceans on our new planet?" asked Julith.

"Yes," he said. "It's the most Earth-like world we could find that wasn't already inhabited. You'll be happy there."

But the trees and grasses, the soil and the fruits thereof, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the waters beneath, form and colour, smell and sound, taste and texture, everything is different. Is alien. The difference is small, subtle, but it is the abyss of two billion years of separate evolution, and no other world can ever quite be Earth.

Julith looked straight at him with solemn eyes. "Are you folk afraid of Hulduvians?" she asked.

"Why, no," he said. "Of course not."

"Then why are you giving Earth to them?" It was a soft question, but it trembled just a little.

"I thought all your people understood the reason by now," said Jorun. "Civilisation—the civilisation of man and his nonhuman allies—has moved inward, toward the great star-clusters of Galactic centre. This part of space means nothing to us any more; it's almost a desert. You haven't seen starlight till you've been by Sagittarius. Now the Hulduvians are another civilisation. They are not the least bit like us; they live on big, poisonous worlds like Jupiter and Saturn. I think they would seem like pretty nice monsters if they weren't so alien to us that neither side can really understand the other. They use the cosmic energies too, but in a different way—and their way interferes with ours just as ours interferes with theirs. Different brains, you see.

"Anyway, it was decided that the two civilisations would get along best by just staying away from each other. If they divided up the Galaxy between them, there would be no interference; it would be too far from one civilisation to the other. The Hulduvians were, really, very nice about it. They're willing to take the outer rim, even if there are fewer stars, and let us have the centre.

"So by the agreement, we've got to have all men and manlike beings out of their territory before they come to settle it, just as they'll move out of ours. Their colonists won't be coming to Jupiter and Saturn for centuries yet; but even so, we have to clear the Sirius Sector now, because there'll be a lot of work to do elsewhere. Fortunately, there are only a few people living in this whole part of space. The Sirius Sector has been an isolated, primi—ah—quiet region since the First Empire fell, fifty thousand years ago."

Julith's voice rose a little. "But those people are us!"

"And the folk of Alpha Centauri and Procyon and Sirius and—oh, hundreds of other stars. Yet all of you together are only one tiny drop in the

quadrillions of the Galaxy. Don't you see, Julith, you have to move for the good of all of us?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I know all that."

She got up, shaking herself. "Let's go swimming."

Jorun smiled and shook his head. "No, I'll wait for you if you want to go."

SHE nodded and ran off down the beach, sheltering behind a dune to put on a bathing-suit. The Terrans had a nudity taboo, in spite of the mild interglacial climate; typical primitive irrationality. Jorun lay back, folding his arms behind his head, and looked up at the darkening sky. The evening star twinkled forth, low and white on the dusk-blue horizon. Venus—or was it Mercury? He wasn't sure. He wished he knew more about the early history of the Solar System, the first men to ride their thunderous rockets out to die on unknown hell-worlds—the first clumsy steps toward the stars. He could look it up in the archives of Corazuno, but he knew he never would. Too much else to do, too much to remember. Probably less than one per cent. of mankind's throngs even knew where Earth was, to-day—though, for a while, it had been quite a tourist-centre. But that was perhaps 30,000 years ago.

Because this world, out of all the billions, has certain physical characteristics, he thought, my race has made them into standards. Our basic units of length and time and acceleration, our comparisons by which we classify the swarming planets of the Galaxy, they all go back ultimately to Earth. We bear that unspoken memorial to our birthplace within our whole civilisation, and will bear it forever. But has she given us more than that? Are our own selves, bodies and minds and dreams, are they also the children of Earth?

Now he was thinking like Kormt, stubborn old Kormt who clung with such a blind strength to this land simply because it was his. When you

considered all the races of this wander-footed species—how many of them there were, how many kinds of man between the stars! And yet they all walked upright; they all had two eyes and a nose between and a mouth below; they were all cells of that great and ancient culture which had begun here, eons past, with the first hairy half-man who kindled a fire against night. If Earth had not had darkness and cold and prowling beasts, oxygen and cellulose and flint, that culture might never have gestated.

I'm getting unlogical. Too tired, nerves worn too thin, psychosomatic control slipping. Now Earth is becoming some obscure mother-symbol for me.

Or has she always been one, for the whole race of us?

A seagull cried harshly overhead and soared from view.

The sunset was smouldering away and dusk rose like fog out of the ground. Julith came running back to him, her face indistinct in the gloom. She was breathing hard, and he couldn't tell if the catch in her voice was laughter or weeping.

"I'd better be getting home," she said.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY flew slowly back. The town was a yellow twinkle of lights, warmth gleaming from windows across many empty kilometres. Jorun set the girl down outside her home.

"Thank you, good sir," she said, curtseying. "Won't you come in to dinner?"

"Well—"

The door opened, etching the girl black against the rudiness inside. Jorun's luminous tunic made him like a torch in the dark. "Why, it's the star-man," said a woman's voice.

"I took your daughter for a swim," he explained. "I hope you don't mind."

"And if we did, what would it matter?" grumbled a bass tone. Jorun recognised Kormt; the old man must

have come as a guest from his farm on the outskirts. "What could we do about it?"

"Now, Granther, that's no way to talk to the gentleman," said the woman. "He's been very kind. Won't you come eat with us, good sir?"

Jorun refused twice, in case they were only being polite, then accepted gladly enough. He was tired of cookery at the inn where he and Zarek boarded. "Thank you."

He entered, ducking under the low door. A single long, smoky-raftered room was kitchen, dining-room and parlour; doors led off to the sleeping quarters. It was furnished with a clumsy elegance, skin rugs, oak wainscoting, carved pillars, glowing ornaments of hammered copper. A radium clock, which must be incredibly old, stood on the stone mantel, above a snapping fire; a chemical-powered gun, obviously of local manufacture, hung over it. Julith's parents, a plain, quiet peasant couple, conducted him to the end of the wooden table, while half a dozen children watched him with large eyes. The younger children were the only Terrans who seemed to find this removal an adventure.

The meal was good and plentiful: meat, vegetables, bread, beer, milk, ice cream, coffee, all of it from the farms hereabout. There wasn't much trade between the few thousand communities of Earth; they were practically self-sufficient. The company ate in silence, as was the custom here. When they were finished, Jorun wanted to go, but it would have been rude to leave immediately. He went over to a chair by the fireplace, across from the one in which Kormt sprawled.

The old man took out a big-bowled pipe and began stuffing it. Shadows wove across his seamed brown face, his eyes were a gleam out of darkness. "I'll go down to City Hall with you soon," he said; "I imagine that's where the work is going on."

"Yes," said Jorun. "I can relieve Zarek at it. I'd appreciate it if you did come, good sir. Your influence is very steady on these people."

"It should be," said Kormt. "I've been their Speaker for almost a hundred years. And my father Gerlaug was before me, and his father Kormt was before him." He took a brand from the fire and held it over his pipe, puffing hard, looking up at Jorun through tangled brows. "Who was your great-grandfather?"

"Why—I don't know. I imagine he's still alive somewhere, but—"

"I thought so. No marriage. No family. No home. No tradition." Kormt shook his massive head, slowly. "I pity you Galactic!"

"Now please, good sir—" Damn it all, the old clodhopper could get as irritating as a faulty computer. "We have records that go back to before man left this planet. Records of everything. It is you who have forgotten."

Kormt smiled and puffed blue clouds at him. "That's not what I meant."

"Do you mean you think it is good for men to live a life that is unchanging, that is just the same from century to century—no new dreams, no new triumphs, always the same grubbing rounds of days? I cannot agree."

JORUN'S mind flickered over history, trying to evaluate the basic motivations of his opponent. Partly cultural, partly biological, that must be it. Once Terra had been the centre of the civilised universe. But the long migration starward, especially after the fall of the First Empire, drained off the most venturesome elements of the population. That drain went on for thousands of years. Sol was backward, ruined and impoverished by the remorseless price of empire, helpless before the storms of barbarian conquest that swept back and forth between the stars. Even after peace was restored, there was nothing to hold a young man or woman of vitality and imagination here—not when you could go toward Galactic centre and join the new civilisation building out there. Space-traffic came ever less frequently to Sol; old machines rusted away and were not re-

placed; best to get out while there was still time.

Eventually there was a fixed psychosomatic type, one which lived close to the land, in primitive changeless communities and isolated farmsteads—a type content to gain its simple needs by the labour of hand, horse, or an occasional battered engine. A culture grew up which increased that rigidity. So few had visited Earth in the last several thousand years—perhaps one outsider a century, stopping briefly off on his way to somewhere else—that there was no challenge or encouragement to alter. The Terrans didn't want more people, more machines, more anything; they wished only to remain as they were.

You couldn't call them stagnant. Their life was too healthy, their civilisation too rich in its own way—folk art, folk music, ceremony, religion, the intimacy of family life which the Galactics had lost—for that term. But to one who flew between the streaming suns, it was a small existence.

Kormt's voice broke in on his reverie. "Dreams, triumphs, work, deeds, love and life and finally death and the long sleep in the earth," he said. "Why should we want to change them? They never grow old; they are new for each child that is born."

"Well," said Jorun, and stopped. You couldn't really answer that kind of logic. It wasn't logic at all, but something deeper.

"Well," he started over, after a while, "as you know, this evacuation was forced on us, too. We don't want to move you, but we must."

"Oh, yes," said Kormt. "You have been very nice about it. It would have been easier, in a way, if you'd come with fire and gun and chains for us, like the barbarians did long ago. We could have understood you better then."

"At best, it will be hard for your people," said Jorun. "It will be a shock, and they'll need leaders to guide them through it. You have a duty to help them out there, good sir."

"Maybe." Kormt blew a series of smoke rings at his youngest descendant, three years old, who crowed with laughter and climbed up on his knee. "But they'll manage."

"You can't seem to realise," said Jorun, "that you are the **last man on Earth** who refuses to go. You will be **alone**. For the rest of your life! We couldn't come back for you later under any circumstances, because there'll be Hulduvian colonies between Sol and Sagittarius which we would disturb in passage. You'll be alone, I say!"

Kormt shrugged. "I'm too old to change my ways; there can't be many years left me, anyway. I can live well, just off the food-stores that'll be left here." He ruffled the child's hair, but his face drew into a scowl. "Now, no more of that, good sir, if you please; I'm tired of this argument."

JORUN nodded and fell into the silence that held the rest. Terrans would sometimes sit for hours without talking, content to be in each other's nearness. He thought of Kormt, Gerlaug's son, last man on Earth, altogether alone, living alone and dying alone; and yet, he reflected, was that solitude any greater than the one in which all men dwell all their days?

Presently the Speaker set the child down, knocked out his pipe, and rose. "Come, good sir," he said, reaching for his staff. "Let us go."

They walked side by side down the street, under the dim lamps and past the yellow windows. The cobbles gave back their footfalls in a dull clatter. Once in a while they passed someone else, a vague figure which bowed to Kormt. Only one did not notice them, an old woman who walked crying between the high walls.

"They say it is never night on your worlds," said Kormt.

Jorun threw him a sidelong glance. His face was a strong jutting of highlights from sliding shadow. "Some planets have been given luminous skies," said the technician, "and a few still have cities, too, where it

is always light. But when every man can control the cosmic energies, there is no real reason for us to live together; most of us dwell far apart. There are very dark nights on my own world, and I cannot see any other home from my own—just the moors.”

“It must be a strange life,” said Kormt. “Belonging to no one.”

They came out on the market-square, a broad paved space walled in by houses. There was a fountain in its middle, and a statue dug out of the ruins had been placed there. It was broken, one arm gone—but still the white slim figure of the dancing girl stood with youth and laughter, forever under the sky of Earth. Jorun knew that lovers were wont to meet here, and briefly, irrationally, he wondered how lonely the girl would be in all the millions of years to come.

The City Hall lay at the farther end of the square, big and dark, its eaves carved with dragons, and the gables topped with wing-spreading birds. It was an old building; nobody knew how many generations of men had gathered here. A long, patient line of folk stood outside it, shuffling in one by one to the registry desk; emerging, they went off quietly into the darkness, toward the temporary shelters erected for them.

Walking by the line, Jorun picked faces out of the shadows. There was a young mother holding a crying child, her head bent over it in a timeless pose, murmuring to soothe it. There was a mechanic, still sooty from his work, smiling wearily at some tired joke of the man behind him. There was a scowling, black-browed peasant who muttered a curse as Jorun went by; the rest seemed to accept their fate meekly enough. There was a priest, his head bowed, alone with his God. There was a younger man, his hands clenching and unclenching, big helpless hands, and Jorun heard him saying to someone else. “—if they could have waited till after harvest. I hate to let good grain stand in the field.”

JORUN went into the main room, toward the desk at the head of the line. Hulking, hairless Zarek was patiently questioning each of the hundreds who came hat in hand before him: name, age, sex, occupation, dependants, special needs or desires. He punches the answers out on the recorder machine, half a million lives were held in its electronic memory.

“Oh, there you are,” his bass rumbled. “Where’ve you been?”

“I had to do some concy work,” said Jorun. That was a private code term, among others: concy, conciliation, anything to make the evacuation go smoothly. “Sorry to be so late. I’ll take over now.”

“All right. I think we can wind the whole thing up by midnight.” Zarek smiled at Kormt. “Glad you came, good sir. There are a few people I’d like you to talk to.” He gestured at half a dozen seated in the rear of the room. Certain complaints were best handled by native leaders.

Kormt nodded and strode over to the folk. Jorun heard a man begin some long-winded explanation: he wanted to take his own plow along, he’d made it himself and there was no better plow in the universe, but the star-man said there wouldn’t be room.

“They’ll furnish us with all the stuff we need, son,” said Kormt.

“But it’s my plow!” said the man. His fingers twisted his cap.

Kormt sat down and began soothing him.

The head of the line waited a few meters off while Jorun took Zarek’s place. “Been a long grind,” said the latter. “About done now, though. And will I be glad to see the last of this planet!”

“I don’t know,” said Jorun. “It’s a lovely world. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more beautiful one.”

Zarek snorted. “Me for Thonnvar! I can’t wait to sit on the terrace by the Scarlet Sea, fern-trees and red grass all around, a glass of oehl in my hand and the crystal geysers in

front of me. You're a funny one, Jorun."

The Fulkhisian shrugged slender shoulders. Zarek clapped him on the back and went out for supper and sleep. Jorun beckoned to the next Terran and settled down to the long, almost mindless routine of registration. He was interrupted once by Kormt, who yawned mightily and bade him good-night; otherwise it was a steady, half-conscious interval in which one anonymous face after another passed by. He was dimly surprised when the last one came up. This was a plump, cheerful, middle-aged fellow with small shrewd eyes, a little more colourfully dressed than the others. He gave his occupation as merchant—a minor tradesman, he explained, dealing in the little things it was more convenient for the peasants to buy than to manufacture themselves.

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long," said Jorun. Concy statement.

"Oh, no." The merchant grinned. "I knew those dumb farmers would be here for hours, so I just went to bed and got up half an hour ago, when it was about over."

"Clever." Jorun rose, sighed, and stretched. The big room was cavernously empty, its lights a harsh glare. It was very quiet here.

"Well, sir, I'm a middling smart chap, if I say it as shouldn't. And you know, I'd like to express my appreciation of all you're doing for us."

"Can't say we're doing much," Jorun locked the machine.

"Oh, the apple-knockers may not like it, but really, good sir, this hasn't been any place for a man of enterprise. It's dead. I'd have got out long ago if there'd been any transportation. Now when we're getting back into civilisation, there'll be some real opportunities. I'll make my pile inside of five years, you bet."

Jorun smiled, but there was a bleakness in him. What chance would this barbarian have even to get near the gigantic work of civilisa-

tion—let alone comprehend it or take part in it. He hoped the little fellow wouldn't break his heart trying.

"Well," he said, "good-night, and good luck to you."

"Good-night, sir. We'll meet again, I trust."

Jorun switched off the lights and went out into the square. It was completely deserted. The moon was up now, almost full, and its cold radiance dimmed the lamps. He heard a dog howling far off. The dogs of Earth—such as weren't taken along—would be lonely, too.

Well, he thought, the job's over. To-morrow, or the next day, the ships come.

CHAPTER FOUR

HE felt very tired, but didn't want to sleep, and willed himself back to alertness. There hadn't been much chance to inspect the ruins, and he felt it would be appropriate to see them by moonlight.

Rising into the air, he ghosted above roofs and trees until he came to the dead city. For a while he hovered in a sky like dark velvet, a faint breeze murmured around him, and he heard the remote noise of crickets and the sea. But stillness enveloped it all, there was no real sound.

Sol City, capital of the legendary First Empire, had been enormous. It must have sprawled over forty or fifty thousand square kilometres when it was in its prime, when it was the gay and wicked heart of human civilisation and swollen with the lifeblood of the stars. And yet those who built it had been men of taste, they had sought out genius to create for them. The city was not a collection of buildings; it was a balanced whole, radiating from the mighty peaks of the central palace, through colonnades and parks and leaping skyways, out to the temple-like villas of the rulers. For all its monstrous size, it had been a fairy sight, a woven lace of polished metal and white, black, red stone, coloured

plastic, music and light—everywhere light.

Bombarded from space; sacked again and again by the barbarian hordes who swarmed maggot-like through the bones of the slain Empire; weathered, shaken by the slow sliding of Earth's crust; pried apart by patient, delicate roots; dug over by hundreds of generations of archaeologists, treasure-seekers, the idly curious; made a quarry of metal and stone for the ignorant peasants who finally huddled about it—still its empty walls and blind windows, crumbling arches and toppled pillars held a ghost of beauty and magnificence which was like a half-remembered dream. A dream the whole race had once had.

And now we're waking up.

Jorun moved silently over the ruins. Trees growing between tumbled blocks dappled them with moonlight and shadow; the marble was very white and fair against darkness. He hovered by a broken caryatid, marvelling at its exquisite leaping litheness; that girl had borne tons of stone like a flower in her hair. Further on, across a street that was a lane of woods, beyond a park that was thick with forest, lay the nearly complete outline of a house. Only its rain-blurred walls stood, but he could trace the separate rooms: here a noble had entertained his friends, robes that were fluid rainbows, jewels dripping fire, swift cynical interplay of wits like sharpened swords rising above music and the clear, sweet laughter of dancing girls; here people whose flesh was now dust had slept and made love and lain side-by-side in darkness to watch the moving pageant of the city; here the slaves had lived and worked and sometimes wept; here the children had played their ageless games under willows, between banks of roses. Oh, it had been a hard and cruel time; it was well gone but it had lived. It had embodied man, all that was noble and splendid and evil and merely wistful in the race, and now its late children had forgotten.

A cat sprang up on one of the walls and flowed noiselessly along it, hunting. Jorun shook himself and flew toward the centre of the city, the imperial palace. An owl hooted somewhere, and a bat fluttered out of his way like a small damned soul blackened by hellfire. He didn't raise a wind-screen, but let the air blow around him, the air of Earth.

THE palace was almost completely wrecked, a mountain of heaped rocks, bare bones of "eternal" metal gnawed thin by steady ages of wind and rain and frost, but once it must have been gigantic. Men rarely built that big nowadays, they didn't need to; and the whole human spirit had changed, become ever more abstract, finding its treasures within itself. But there had been an elemental magnificence about early man and the works he raised to challenge the sky.

One tower still stood—a gutted shell, white under the stars, rising in a filigree of columns and arches which seemed impossibly airy, as if it were built of moonlight. Jorun settled on its broken upper balcony, dizzily high above the black-and-white fantasy of the ruins. A hawk flew shrieking from its nest, then there was silence.

No—wait—another yell, ringing down the star ways, a dark streak across the moon's face. "Hai-ah!" Jorun recognised the joyful shout of young Cluthe, rushing through heaven like a demon on a broomstick, and scowled in annoyance. He didn't want to be bothered now.

Well, they had as much right here as he. He repressed the emotion, and even managed a smile. After all, he would have liked to feel gay and reckless at times, but he had never been able to. Jorun was little older than Cluthe—a few centuries at most—but he came of a melancholy folk; he had been born old.

Another form pursued the first. As they neared, Jorun recognised Taliu-venna's supple outline. Those two had been teamed up for one of the African districts, but—

They sensed him and came wildly out of the sky to perch on the balcony railing and swing their legs above the heights. "How're you?" asked Cluthe. His lean face laughed in the moonlight. "Whoo-oo, what a flight!"

"I'm all right," said Jorun. "You through in your sector?"

"Uh-huh. So we thought we'd just duck over and look in here. Last chance anyone'll ever have to do some sight-seeing on Earth."

Taliuvenna's full lips drooped a bit as she looked over the ruins. She came from Yunith, one of the few planets where they still kept cities, and was as much a child of their soaring arrogance as Jorun of his hills and tundras and great empty seas. "I thought it would be bigger," she said.

"Well, they were building this fifty or sixty thousand years ago," said Cluthe. "Can't expect too much."

"There is good art left here," said Jorun. "Pieces which for one reason or another weren't carried off. But you have to look around for it."

"I've seen a lot of it already, in museums," said Taliuvenna. "Not bad."

"C'mon, Tally," cried Cluthe. He touched her shoulder and sprang into the air. "Tag! You're it!"

She screamed with laughter and shot off after him. They rushed across the wilderness, weaving in and out of empty windows and broken colonnades, and their shouts woke a clamour of echoes.

Jorun sighed. I'd better go to bed, he thought. It's late.

THE spaceship was a steely pillar against a low grey sky. Now and then a fine rain would drizzle down, blurring it from sight; then that would end, and the ship's flanks would glisten as if they were polished. Clouds scudded overhead like flying smoke, and the wind was loud in the trees.

The line of Terrans moving slowly into the vessel seemed to go on forever. A couple of the ship's crew

flew above them, throwing out a shield against the rain. They shuffled without much talk or expression, pushing carts filled with their little possessions. Jorun stood to one side, watching them go by, one face after another—scored and darkened by the sun of Earth, the winds of Earth, hands still grimy with the soil of Earth.

Well, he thought, there they go. They aren't being as emotional about it as I thought they would. I wonder if they really do care.

Julith went past with her parents. She saw him and darted from the line and curtsied before him.

"Good-bye, good sir," she said. Looking up, she showed him a small and serious face. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Well," he lied, "I might look in on you sometime."

"Please do! In a few years, maybe, when you can."

It takes many generations to raise a people like this to our standard. In a few years—to me—she'll be in her grave.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," he said.

She gulped. "Yes," she said, so low he could barely hear her. "Yes, I know I will." She turned and ran back to her mother. The raindrops glistened in her hair.

Zarek came up behind Jorun. "I made a last-minute sweep of the whole area," he said. "Detected no sign of human life. So it's all taken care of, except your old man."

"Good," said Jorun tonelessly.

"I wish you could do something about him."

"So do I."

Zarek strolled off again.

A young man and woman, walking hand in hand, turned out of the line not far away and stood for a little while. A spaceman zoomed over to them. "Better get back," he warned. "You'll get rained on."

"That's what we wanted," said the young man.

The spaceman shrugged and resumed his hovering. Presently the couple re-entered the line.

The tail of the procession went by Jorun and the ship swallowed it fast. The rain fell harder, bouncing off his force-shield like silver spears. Lightning winked in the west, and he heard the distant exuberance of thunder.

Kormt came walking slowly toward him. Rain streamed off his clothes and matted his long grey hair and beard. His wooden shoes made a wet sound in the mud. Jorun extended the force-shield to cover him. "I hope you've changed your mind," said the Fulkhisian.

"No, I haven't," said Kormt. "I just stayed away till everybody was aboard. Don't like good-byes."

"You don't know what you're doing," said Jorun for the —thousandth? —time. "It's plain madness to stay here alone."

"I told you I don't like goodbyes," said Kormt harshly.

"I have to go advise the captain of the ship," said Jorun. "You have maybe half an hour before she lifts. Nobody will laugh at you for changing your mind."

"I won't." Kormt smiled without warmth. "You people are the future, I guess. Why can't you leave the past alone? I'm the past." He looked toward the far hills, hidden by the noisy rain. "I like it here, Galactic. That should be enough for you."

"Well, then—" Jorun held out his hand in the archaic gesture of Earth. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye." Kormt took the hand with a brief, indifferent clasp. Then he turned and walked off toward the village. Jorun watched him till he was out of sight.

The technician paused in the air-lock door, looking over the grey landscape and the village from whose chimneys no smoke rose. Farewell, my mother, he thought. And then, surprising himself: Maybe Kormt is doing the right thing after all.

He entered the ship and the door closed behind him.

TOWARD evening, the clouds lifted and the sky showed a clear pale blue—as if it had been washed clean—and the grass and leaves glistened. Kormt came out of the house to watch the sunset. It was a good one, all flame and gold. A pity little Julith wasn't here to see it; she'd always liked sunsets. But Julith was so far away now that if she sent a call to him, calling with the speed of light, it would not come before he was dead.

Nothing would come to him. Not ever again.

He tamped his pipe with a horny thumb and lit it and drew a deep cloud into his lungs. Hands in pockets, he strolled down the wet streets. The sound of his clogs was unexpectedly loud.

Well, son, he thought, now you're got a whole world all to yourself, to do with just as you like. You're the richest man who ever lived.

There was no problem in keeping alive. Enough food of all kinds was stored in the town's freeze-vault to support a hundred men for the ten or twenty years remaining to him. But he'd want to stay busy. He could maybe keep three farms from going to seed—watch over fields and orchards and livestock, repair the buildings, dust and wash and light up in the evening. A man ought to keep busy.

He came to the end of the street, where it turned into a gravelled road winding up toward a high hill, and followed that. Dusk was creeping over the fields, the sea was a metal streak very far away and a few early stars blinked forth. A wind was springing up, a soft murmurous wind that talked in the trees. But how quiet things were!

On top of the hill stood the chapel, a small steeped building of ancient stone. He let himself in the gate and walked around to the graveyard behind. There were many of the demure white tombstones—thousands of years of Solis Township men and women who had lived and worked and begotten, laughed and wept and died.

Someone had put a wreath on one grave only this morning; it brushed against his leg as he went by. Tomorrow it would be withered, and weeds would start to grow. He'd have to tend the chapel yard, too. Only fitting.

He found his family plot and stood with feet spread apart, fists on hips, smoking and looking down at the markers Gerlaug Kormt's son, Tarna Huwan's daughter, these hundred years had they lain in the earth. Hello, Dad, hello, Mother. His fingers reached out and stroked the headstone of his wife. And so many of his children were here, too; sometimes he found it hard to believe that tall Gerlaug and laughing Stamm and shy, gentle Huwan were gone. He'd outlived too many people.

I had to stay, he thought. This is my land, I am of it and I couldn't go. Someone had to stay and keep the land, if only for a little while. I can give it ten more years before the forest comes and takes it.

Darkness grew around him. The woods beyond the hill loomed like a wall. Once he started violently, he thought he heard a child crying. No, only a bird. He cursed himself for the senseless pounding of his heart.

Gloomy place here, he thought. Better get back to the house.

He groped slowly out of the yard, toward the road. The stars were out now. Kormt looked up and thought he had never seen them so bright. Too bright; he didn't like it.

Go away, stars, he thought. You took my people, but I'm staying here. This is my land. He reached down to touch it, but the grass was cold and wet under his palm.

The gravel scrunched loudly as he

walked, and the wind mumbled in the hedges, but there was no other sound. Not a voice called; not an engine turned. Not a dog barked. No, he hadn't thought it would be so quiet.

And dark. No lights. Have to tend the street lamps himself—it was no fun, not being able to see the town from here, not being able to see anything except the stars. Should have remembered to bring a flashlight, but he was old and absentminded, and there was no one to remind him. When he died, there would be no one to hold his hands; no one to close his eyes and lay him in the earth—and the forests would grow in over the land and wild beasts would nuzzle his bones.

But I knew that. What of it? I'm tough enough to take it.

The stars flashed and flashed above him. Looking up, against his own will, Kormt saw how bright they were, how bright and quiet. And how very far away! He was seeing light that had left its home before he was born.

He stopped, sucking in his breath between his teeth. "No," he whispered.

This was his land. This was Earth, the home of man; it was his and he was its. This was the land, and not a single dust-mote, crazily reeling and spinning through an endlessness of dark and silence, cold and immensity. Earth could not be so alone!

The last man alive. The last man in all the world!

He screamed, then, and began to run. His feet clattered loud on the road; the small sound was quickly swallowed by silence, and he covered his face against the relentless blaze of the start. But there was no place to run to, no place at all.

THE END.

CAPTAIN BARNES AND THE LAW

By TARR ROMAN

Galactic Law declared that no offensive action might be taken against alien life-forms without consulting the council. Captain Barnes, of course, could defend himself if attacked, but he'd have to prove the necessity when he returned. And, in this case, the only way Barnes could prove that these creatures were dangerous was to sit back and let them destroy his ship!

THE space cruiser Rigel wallowed in deep space, a billion miles from nowhere on the edge of the galaxy, her slashed hull gleaming dully in the starlight. Halfway down her long body, a detail of space-suited men worked clumsily around the jagged hole a meteor had torn in the ship, striving to cover it with steel plate. Off to the side, Captain Barnes stood, discussing the damage with his chief navigator Moran.

"Did you ever hear of such luck?" growled Barnes, disgustedly, through his communicator. "Running into a meteor-shower way out here. What with the engineroom wrecked, and the overdrive controls knocked out, we're stuck for at least two days."

"We're lucky the damn thing wasn't any bigger," agreed Moran, gloomily. "A little more mass and we'd all be stray bits of energy floating around the galaxy. Lord, what a run that was! I thought we were finished a dozen times; that shower was deep!"

"Not so deep," said Barnes. "A five-minute run through a meteor-shower just seems like an eternity. But I guess we have to be thankful we came through alive; we'll get the ship repaired and be on our way as fast as we can." He glanced nervously around at the dimly lit void. "I don't know. Out here at the tail end of the galaxy, I get kind of jumpy."

"I know what you mean," admitted

Moran. "The area hasn't been explored thoroughly and you never know what . . ." His words trailed off and he strained his eyes out into the blackness to see. "Captain! That star is getting bigger!"

"Where?" demanded Barnes, cutting his eyes around sharply.

"No, wait a minute. It isn't a star; it seems like a small meteor coming down near the bow. Only it's got a light on it."

"What the devil," exclaimed the captain, following Moran's pointing arm. A small, red-tipped object was floating down toward the bow of the Rigel. As they watched, a sheet of yellow flame shot out of the object, checking its descent almost completely and it came to rest gently on the hull of the ship.

"Let's get over there," shouted Moran.

"Wait," ordered Barnes; "it may be dangerous. Let's see what happens next." By this time, the crew of men had stopped working and were staring curiously at the glowing object on the bow. Suddenly, the light on the object went out and, for a moment, nothing happened. Barnes and Moran moved closer, their hands gripping drawn blasters.

Then a small door opened from the side of the object and what appeared to be a string of insects filed out. They crawled slowly over the hull of

the Rigel, spreading out in all directions as Barnes and Moran stared in amazement. Finally, the captain found his voice.

"Well, I'll be damned," he breathed in wonder. "That thing's a space ship."

"And those are intelligent beings coming out of it," muttered Moran. "They must be."

"Look," exclaimed Barnes. "What are they doing now?" The tiny creatures had brought out a pole of some kind and were hauling up a wee bit of material. They all stood stiffly at attention as the ceremony went on and at the end, one of their number drew apart and apparently addressed them. Then they broke up and scattered about again.

"If I didn't know better," blurted Barnes, "I'd say that they were claiming the ship as their own."

"Sure, that's it," echoed Moran; "why I'll bet they think it's a new planet. It's big enough to be, for them. Let's get a little closer."

The two men moved up cautiously, keeping themselves behind the cover of the forward tube housing. They watched as the tiny creatures set up a camp by their miniature space ship and formed exploration parties. The ranging groups travelled about 100 feet in every direction, set up markers and returned to their ship. Inside the camp, the creatures were setting up minute machines for some purpose of their own.

"So, what now?" asked Moran, after minutes of absorbed watching.

"Let them stay there," answered Barnes; "they're not doing any harm. Then, when we get the ship fixed, we'll think of something else."

"Well, whatever we do, we can't hurt them," observed Moran. "Galactic law is definite on that. All intelligent life is to be left to develop by itself. Under no circumstances will any offensive action be taken against alien life forms without consultation of the council. I'm quoting."

"You're damned good, too," said

Barnes, wryly. "You missed your calling. You should have been a space lawyer. Well, come on inside. If these midgets are so smart, they must have radio. And maybe we can establish contact."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Barnes and Moran, together with the ship's language expert, Crane, were sitting nervously around the radio set, from which was issuing the strangest sounds they had ever heard. The sounds consisted of sequences of rising squeaks, mixed with underlying hisses and clicks. And the net effect was weird enough to make any man's nerves raw.

"Well, can you make anything out of it?" asked Barnes, finally.

"Something," grunted Crane. "It's similar to the languages of the Bettel system. I don't think the clicks and hisses mean anything; they're just physical noises. It's the squealing that carries meaning."

"I don't know how that fellow does it," said Moran, admiringly. "This sounds like the wildest gibberish to me."

"Well, it isn't so difficult," said Crane. "There are just so many combinations of sounds that can be made and similarities are bound to occur."

"Never mind the semantic discussion," snapped Barnes. "Can you get an idea of what they're saying?"

"More or less," declared Crane. "Somebody in the ship is giving orders to the ones outside. He's telling them to hurry it up. Then, the ones outside are making reports about how operations are going."

"What operations are they talking about?" demanded Barnes.

"I don't know," replied Crane. "It seems to have something to do with machines they're setting up. They're getting ready to use them in some way."

"Oh, fine," remarked Barnes. "They've found a home and now they're going to live. Lord knows what they have in mind."

"Let's try to contact them," suggest-

ed Moran. "Think you could talk to them, Crane?"

"Probably," smiled the language expert. "Although with an accent."

He reached for the transmitter switch and hell broke loose. Alarm bells began to clamour throughout the ship and automatic airlocks slammed. "What's going on?" yelled Crane, pulling his hand back.

"The hull!" shouted Moran. "Look at the hull temperature gauge. Those midgets are burning a hole through it."

"Get on your spacesuits," ordered Barnes. "And bring blasters; we're going to put an end to this right now."

"Wait a minute," yelled Moran. "Those creatures don't know what they're doing. They think this is a planet, remember? They're probably mining the hull; we can't kill them for that."

Barnes hesitated in indecision. "All right," he said, finally. "They can't do too much damage. Get on that radio, Crane, and tell them to stop."

CRANE switched on the transmitter and cleared his throat. Then he uttered a few hoarse squeals. The noise from the receiver died down and then rose up again into furious racket. Crane continued methodically and then stopped. From the receiver came a series of sharp noises.

"They want to know who we are," said Crane. "They say this is their planet and whoever we are, we'll just have to move."

"Tell them this is our ship," said Barnes, "and we're going to keep it. Tell them this is not a planet, but a spaceship."

Crane relayed the information and smiled at the answer.

"They say we're crazy. Or else we're trying to fool them, and clumsily at that. They say they'll give us 10 kopeks, however long that is, to get off and then they're going to hunt us down and kill us. I think they've got us mixed up with a rival

of theirs. That's all they're saying for now."

"Great," exclaimed Barnes. "We can't hurt them and we can't run away from them; what does Galactic Law say about a situation like this, Moran?"

The navigator made a wry face. "We could kill them in self defense," he replied; "but only as a last resort. And even then, we'd have a lot of explaining to do when we got back."

"I know," agreed Barnes, sadly. "I once conked a Rigelian with a rock for shooting arrows at me and I never heard the end of it."

"Look—maybe we can scare these fellows off," suggested Moran. "Suppose I go out there in a spacesuit and walk around. Maybe, when they see the size of me, they'll tuck tail and run."

"Could be," agreed Barnes. "Try it, but be careful. If they can burn holes in the hull, they've probably got some pretty deadly weapons."

"Don't worry," said Moran. "I'll give those dwarfs a scare they'll never forget."

Fifteen minutes later, Moran was back. His spacesuit had been nearly burned through in a dozen places and, as he struggled out of it, Barnes and Crane could see the strain on his face.

"Those damned midgets nearly killed me," he blurted. "I just got back to cover in time. Another second . . ." He lit a cigarette with shaky hands.

"Well, they've got guts," observed Barnes, drily. "That only makes our problem tougher."

"They've started mining again," remarked Crane, as the temperature gauge needle jumped. "If they keep it up much longer, they'll hit air."

"I say blast them," declared Moran, savagely. "They're a menace to the safety of the ship." His face was just beginning to get its colour back but his hands still shook.

"We might have to do that and the hell with Galactic Law," remarked Barnes. "But I'm getting to like

the little devils; anyone who would stand up to a big ape like Moran here deserves a chance. What do you say, Moran?"

"I don't think it's funny," muttered Moran. "Those little—"

"Well, as I see it," interrupted Crane, "it's either us or them." He was staring at the hull temperature gauge in fascination. "And I'd much rather have it be them than us. Sure, we can seal off that compartment they're burning into. The automatic doors have done that already. But what's going to stop them from doing it someplace else? I'm with Moran. Blast them."

"We could set up an energy ray on the ship's stern and blow them to pieces," suggested Moran. "Simple as rolling off an asteroid."

"Look, I've got a better idea," said Barnes. "The overdrive controls are out for a while but we've still got the landing jets. I'm going to pull that repair crew in and fire up the jets." He reached for the communicator.

"Are you thinking of shaking them off?" asked Moran, incredulously. "That'll never work. Why—"

"Patience, my boy," said Barnes, gently. "The one thing a budding space lawyer has to have is patience. Man your stations." He ordered the repair crew inside and waited while Moran fumed angrily around the control cabin.

A FEW minutes later, he cut in both forward and rear jets, playing them so that they counteracted each other almost completely. The ship began to vibrate under the opposing thrusts and soon, the men's teeth were chattering uncontrollably. He continued the operation until the glassite on the gauges was cracking and then eased off the jets.

"What are you doing?" demanded Moran.

"Figure it out by yourself," answered Barnes, grinning. "A space

lawyer should have initiative and ingenuity, my boy. Lots of competition in the field, you know."

He cut in the jets again and the ship began to vibrate like a fixed leaf in the wind. He kept it up until he thought the ship would fly apart and then cut off the jets. Smilingly, he turned to the navigator. "Now, my boy, let's climb into spacesuits and go for a walk. I think we'll see something interesting."

Outside, on the hull of the ship, they approached the tiny creatures' camp cautiously. Moran inhaled sharply in surprise at what they saw. The little aliens were hurrying toward their ship. As they watched, the last one entered and the port slid shut. In a moment, a sheet of flame shot out of the miniature space ship and it rose gently away from the hull. It accelerated sharply and, in seconds, the red glow of its jets waned into nothingness in the void. Barnes turned to his navigator and laughed.

"Get it yet? We couldn't shake them off; I was pretty sure of that. If they have space ships, they certainly must have magnetic grapples. We had to fix it so they'd leave of their own accord."

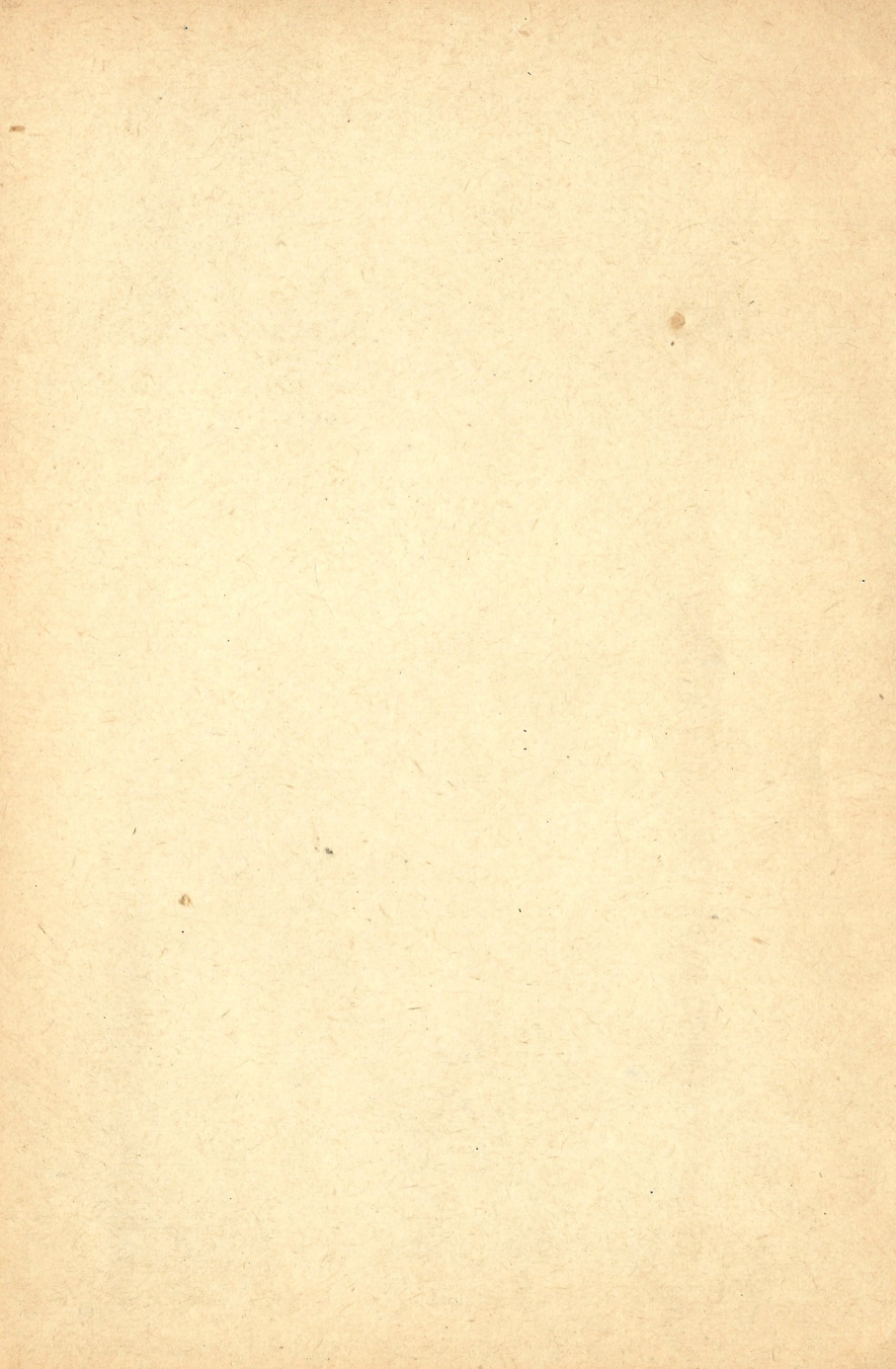
"So?" asked Moran in bewilderment.

"So, I fixed it so that their new planet would be useless to them. The jets caused vibration to us but were earthquakes to them. And a planet with violent earthquakes is useless to anybody. So they decided to pack up and leave instead of hanging around wasting their time."

Moran grinned broadly. "Captain, you're a pure genius," he marvelled. "This beats anything I ever heard for getting around the law. Let me congratulate you, legally that is."

"It was nothing," said Barnes, modestly. "I've been getting around the Law of Gravitation for years." They laughed together and went out to survey the repair work on their planet.

THE END



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