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As a scientist he believed that imitation was the surest form of success.

*WHO SPEAKS OF
CONQUEST?*

by

LAN WRIGHT

ACE BOOKS

A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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THE EARTH IN PERIL

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WHO SPEAKS OF CONQUEST?

Prologue

The greatness of a civilization is judged not only by its size but also by its ability to survive.

The successive rises and declines of the ancient Terran empires and civilizations are perfect illustrations of this point, for while their sizes were relatively great, their eras of power were usually short. But each of them contributed something to the whole, and Mankind struggled up over the crumbling remains of forgotten empires.

Indeed, human civilization had for so long been accustomed to survive even the most crushing disasters, that it never dreamed of questioning its innate superiority or its divine right to rule.

But there was another empire, unknown to humankind, one which had survived a million years. It was an empire founded on ambition, upheld by power, and maintained by overburdened necessity. It had proved its ability to survive by virtue of more than a million years of undisputed rule, and its size was the size of the Galaxy.

THE FIRST Terran Interstellar Expedition, under the leadership of Commander Stephen Brady, United Terran Space Fleet, landed on the fifth planet of the star Sirius on July 8th, 2223 Solar date time, and found a reception committee awaiting its arrival.

The flight was made three years after the initial discovery of the Stellar Drive, and it is safe to record that, whatever else the expedition anticipated finding, it had not expected a reception committee.

Exactly four months after their landing on Sirius Five, the five ships of the expedition flickered out of stellar drive some twenty-five thousand miles from the Earth, and completed their journey on the flaming jets of rockets which had not yet been rendered obsolete by their mighty successor, the Drive. In three hours they grounded at White Sands Spaceport.

Partly because of the inaccessibility of White Sands, and partly because of official restrictions, the return of the expedition was comparatively quiet. Apart from spaceport officials and the earthbound members of the great Sirius Project, there were no great welcoming crowds; and inside ten minutes of his ship's landing, Commander Brady was in the office of General Drummond, the Chief Security Officer of the Stellar Exploration Commission.

Brady was a thickset man of slightly over medium height, his normally deep-tanned face now a somewhat pasty white after his long spell away from normal sunlight. It was a pallor which even sunray treatment could not entirely elim-

inate. His hair was dark and wavy, but not, thought Drummond, as dark as it had been when he left on his mission. There were tired patches under his eyes, eyes which were deep blue and had a piercing, faraway glint in them, a glint which was to become the mark of the deep-space man.

All this Drummond took in at a glance as he shook hands with Brady, and said with embarrassed inadequacy, "Glad to see you back, Commander."

Brady smiled in return. "You mean you're surprised to see us back."

Drummond waved him to a chair and seated himself before replying. "Frankly, yes. I, for one, didn't expect the first expedition to succeed. After all, they so rarely do. It took twelve attempts to get a successful return from the Moon, eight to reach Mars, and seventeen to reach Venus." He smiled and shook his head. "No, I didn't expect you back."

"I suppose the odds were against us," admitted Brady, "but we didn't start thinking about that until we switched to rocket power on the way back; then Murphy said how nice it would be if, after coming all this way, we ran out of rocket fuel. Still, we made it, and that's the main thing."

"Is it really the main thing?" asked Drummond. "I want to know what's out there, the whole world wants to know it. The main thing is—just *that*."

Brady shook his head, "Sorry, sir," he said, "But you and the whole world will have to wait. I've already sent a private report by special code to the President of the Senate, and I'm not saying a word until I've got permission from him."

Drummond's jaw dropped in astonishment. His whole job as Chief Security Officer was based on the interrogations he was to carry out on members of the expedition, interrogations which would ultimately lead to his compiling a highly confidential report to be submitted to a secret session of the World Senate.

Before he could speak, Brady went on: "I have instructed all members of the ships' crews and all scientific personnel to say nothing until I, or the President, give them permission.

Drummond gaped in outraged bewilderment, and it was seconds before he managed to gasp, "But, Brady, this is ridiculous. I am here to take your report on behalf of the President and the Senate; you have no right to issue such orders without my consent, and I shall see that they are countermanded immediately."

Brady lost his smile early in the tirade, and when it was ended he said, "I'm sorry, sir, but what I have to tell is too big for anyone but the President to hear. I can't take any chances on its leaking out. Even my own men don't know the whole story, but they know enough to let the whole of the cat out of the bag if they start telling it. I must apologize for my behavior, but I think the President will endorse my action, and I would be glad if you will suspend judgment until you have heard from him."

After a minute Drummond nodded reluctantly. "I trust your judgment, Brady. I'll arrange for a special plane to take you to Peace River. The President is vacationing down there at the moment."

Hugo Bannerman, seventeenth President of the World Senate, hated written reports. He had received a transcript of Brady's coded message about an hour before Brady and the ships landed. The report was a long one, and it began by apologizing for approaching the President over General Drummond's head, and went on to tell of momentous discoveries which should be first and foremost for the President's ears alone.

Bannerman didn't bother to read further; he preferred to learn the facts of any particular case directly from the lips of the person best qualified to give them. So just before Commander Brady left in his special plane, he received a

peremptory summons to wait upon the President and give him, verbally, the details of his voyage.

He welcomed Brady cordially, for it had been his own personal prestige that had forced the passage of the Bill in the Senate authorizing expenditure on the great project of reaching for the stars. Its success was a vindication of his policy.

"I read the first page of your report," he said, "and that's why I sent for you. I know you found another race out there, and I have released that information for public distribution. But that is all I have said. What I want from you, Brady, is your story, with your own feelings and reactions thrown in, and I can't learn those from a few sheets of paper, even if you had gone so far as to forget your Naval training and include a few emotional suppositions." He smiled slightly as he noted Brady's discomfiture.

Brady leaned back in his wooden-armed chair. "Do you think it was wise to let that much out, sir, without reading the rest of the report?"

Bannerman banged his pipe on the heavy chrome ash-tray on his desk.

"Everyone in the world knows you're back, Commander," he replied. "If something official isn't forthcoming quickly, there will be all sorts of rumors and threats flying about. People will want to know why we are suppressing the news, and they will accuse the government of commercial exploitation, of policial banditry, of everything under the sun. I gave them that much to keep them quiet; as an official report from the office of the President, it will be believed, and I have told them that we are busy studying the rest of the knowledge we have gained before issuing a full bulletin on the expedition."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Brady, flushed again. "I didn't realize it was like that."

"How could you; you're a spaceman, not a politician,"

smiled Bannerman. "Now, go on, and tell the whole thing in your own words."

Brady leaned forward in his chair, his arms pressing hard into the sides. "There's not just one race out there, sir; there are hundreds," he said quietly.

Bannerman's face lost its smile; he whistled. "You must have kept that fact pretty quiet, Brady," he remarked.

The Commander nodded. "No one knows outside the officers and the scientific complement, sir. I couldn't keep quiet about one race, but about hundreds—" he shook his head expressively,—“I didn't dare let that get around until I'd reported it officially."

Bannerman nodded and drew an deep breath, "Well," he said, resingedly, "let's have the rest of it."

"From what we learned, only one race counts for anything," continued Brady. "They're known as the Rihnans. They control the whole Galaxy, and every other race is subservient to them."

Bannerman's face grew longer. "How many more shocks like that have you got up your sleeve?" he asked.

Brady smiled slightly. "From an assignment like this you must expect surprises, and I can assure you there are a lot more. The facts, as briefly as possible, are these: The people with whom we came in direct contact are the Centaurans; they are one of the underdogs, so to speak. We never saw a Rihnan in the whole eleven weeks we were with them."

"You mean the Centaurans were in control of their own spaceships, and their own weapons, and there were no Rihnans in command or control?"

"That's right, but I'll have to start at the beginning, if I'm to make any sense out of it for you," said Brady.

"The Rihnan Galactic Empire has been in existence in its present form for nearly a million years."

Bannerman's eyebrows went up sharply, but he said nothing.

"The main part of their history really begins some six hundred thousand years ago, when a cosmic calamity destroyed their home system, three planets in the Fomalhaut Group. Their sun turned suddenly and violently into a white dwarf and, despite their scientific advances, they couldn't gain sufficient warning of the disaster to evacuate their worlds. The greater part of the race was wiped out, together with the three planets which had held it. But that calamity did not, as you would expect, loosen the Rihnan hold on the Galaxy. The remnants of the race, scattered through space, acted quickly and ingeniously to rearrange matters. They formed what we found today, an empire without a center, in which the homeless race is master.

"They formed a central Galactic Council to govern, and as far as I could gather, this is a body made up of one representative from each of the member states, presided over by an elected Rihnan. They meet roughly once a year."

"Being a president myself, I smell a rat," remarked Bannerman. "Who elects the president?"

Brady grinned. "That's the catch, sir. The C.G.C., as it's known for short, is responsible to the Grand Council of the Rihnan Hierarchy, and the Hierarchy appoints the president. The Grand Council is made up of Rihnans from all parts of the Galaxy, and nearly all the posts are hereditary."

Bannerman drew a deep breath. "Politics don't seem to alter much anywhere, do they? It's almost the same technique the Russians used back in the nineteen-forties: unite and rule, even if the people don't want to unite. Still, they must be pretty smart to use it on a whole universe."

"That's not all by a long way," put in Brady. "Their real genius is shown by their handling of the shift in the balance of power, the sort of shift that must happen when

such a catastrophe occurs, and which could have been fatal to an empire the size of theirs. Most of what I'm going to tell you now we gained by observation and by careful indirect questioning; a lot of it is supposition, but the politico-psychologists think that it is pretty accurate.

"Obviously, while their own system was in being, the Rihnans had absolute control; they had a central base for operations against any hostile action which might be forthcoming, and with that base gone they had no place that could safely be called a refuge, and, short of taking over an entire system, there didn't seem to be any way out. That they didn't attempt to do just that, we believe, was because they didn't have time to organize it. They had to move fast and such a scheme wasn't fast enough.

"It appears that their science is, generally speaking, in complete opposition to that of any other race in the Galaxy. Its principles, so we are told by the Centaurans, are incomprehensible to other races, and, as a result, their genius at inventing totally destructive weapons is second to none. Early in their reign the Rihnans discovered that, as a result of these two factors, no other race could duplicate their weapons even if given a working sample. They could be operated by other races, yes; but built, repaired or duplicated, no!"

Bannerman leaned forward incredulously over his desk. "Are you quite serious?" he asked grimly.

Brady nodded.

"But if that's so—"

"Bang go our hopes of carving a stellar empire," finished Brady.

"That is as may be, but let me finish. The Rihnans decided that the desperate situation they were in called for desperate measures, and they got the idea of giving an equal number of each type of weapon to each separate member of the empire. With the weapons went the equally incomprehensible means of defense. You'd think that such

an action was lunatic in the extreme. Well, other races thought so too, but for a while nothing happened; they were all waiting for someone else to make the first move. Then, two minor states, with long-standing grievances against each other, tried to beat one another's brains out with the aid of their new toys. The story goes that the war went on for two years, and at the end of that time no lives had been lost, no damage had been done, and both of the belligerents were bankrupt. All that time the Rihnans sat back, did nothing, and said nothing. The war finally degenerated into a sort of farcical comic opera and died out to the ridicule of the rest of the Empire, and from that time war has been dead—almost."

Bannerman grunted as Brady paused; he had not missed the menace behind Brady's added, "almost."

"After all that, I can only assume that you have another bombshell you want to toss into my lap," he said. "Well, let's have that, too."

"I'm afraid so," replied Brady. "It's the answer to the question: 'Why have we never known of all this busy Universe before?' The answer is, briefly, that until recently we did not meet the standard necessary for the Rihnans to take an active interest in us. They knew of our existence, all right; the atomic bomb explosions in the nineteen-forties told them that. That's how they got to know about most up-and-coming races; nearly all of them reach that stage at some time or other, and then they either blow themselves to eternity or develop, as we have done, to the point where interstellar travel is reached. If the first happens, well, it's just too bad; no one is interested. But if the latter is the case, then the race concerned becomes sufficiently interesting to warrant inclusion in the Empire."

"If they want to be included," put in Bannerman.

"That is where my 'almost' comes in with regard to war," said Brady. "It seems that a lot of races don't want

to come in. They prefer to stay outside and try and carve an empire for themselves. Only there isn't anything left for them to carve an empire from, except the Rihnans, and that is the only time that war rears its ugly head in the Galaxy; only it isn't war, it's plain one-sided slaughter. Every weapon the Rihnans have ever invented is turned against the newcomers to show them the error of their ways."

He paused grimly. "I might add that there are no independent races in the Galaxy."

Bannerman relaxed in his chair, and blew his nose with some violence. "I see why you didn't want to report to anyone else but me," he said. "You couldn't do anything else *but* refuse to talk to Drummond."

Bannerman walked over to the window and stood for nearly five minutes without moving, then he turned and slowly made his way back to his seat.

"Either we join the empire or else—" he remarked. "Is that it?"

Brady nodded. "That's it, sir."

"We have very little time in which to act," mused the President. "We cannot accept their terms and play for time until we've caught up with them technically. That might take hundreds of years, and by that time the whole Solar system will be rotten with traders and tourists, diplomats and spies from all over the Galaxy. We'd have no chance of developing anything in secret."

He sat back in his chair and regarded the ceiling with almost myopic intensity. Brady fidgeted in his chair, his own thoughts throughout the return trip had paralleled the President's exactly. He stirred, fearful at first of interrupting Bannerman's train of thought, then he said, tentatively, "Sir—"

"I suppose," commented Bannerman, "you are going to tell me that you have the solution?"

"No, sir, only an idea," replied Brady.

Bannerman straightened in his chair, "Well, that's more than I have," he said. "Let's hear it."

"Our main objective for the immediate future must be to get hold of some samples of the Rihnans' weapons," Brady told him. "We can do nothing unless we find out why the Rihnans are invincible. We may be able to find out what makes them tick, and after the way we cracked the secret of Stellar Drive I'd give us at least a fifty-fifty chance of doing it. The next point is that we must get hold of those weapons without arousing suspicion, for if the Rihnans know what we're up to, well—" Brady left the sentence unfinished and sat back.

Bannerman nodded his agreement. "We certainly can't attack without having some idea what we are attacking. I take it you have some ideas on how all this can be done?"

"Yes sir, I think it can be arranged," replied Brady, dryly.

II

THE THREE SHIPS were well hidden in the black depths of the rock-walled valley of Triton, the larger of Neptune's two satellites.

Stephen Brady was confident that, from where they lay, no detector could find them. He sat in the main control roof of his squadron's flagship and waited, as he had waited for three days, for the passing of the Centauran ship bearing ambassadors to the Solar system. His plan was not foolproof, he knew, but he hoped that its very simplicity would make it succeed.

He squiggled aimlessly on a sheet of paper while his thoughts wandered half-heartedly over a hundred details of

the operation. He looked up from his doodling as the cabin door was pushed back and the tall, blond figure of his second-in-command, Lieutenant Murphy, entered.

"Any sign of them yet, Murphy?" His question was purely rhetorical.

The Lieutenant shook his head. "No, sir; no trace. I'm keeping detector power as low as possible in case they are able to spot it."

Murphy pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to Brady who accepted it with a mumbled, "Thanks."

"Are you sure they'll send the sort of ship we want, sir?" asked Murphy after a moment's silence spent in lighting up.

Brady smiled grimly. "They'd better, Mr. Murphy. We're banking that they'll come dressed in their fanciest clothes to impress us barbarians—and that means a Rihnan super-ship. But all we can do is hope."

The intercom buzzed briefly as he finished speaking, and he leaned forward to flip open the switch.

"Detector room calling Commander Brady."

"Go ahead detection, Brady here," he replied, his eyes meeting Murphy's triumphantly.

"Three craft approaching from direction of Pluto orbit. Range two million plus. Leading two craft identifiable, third of origin unknown and considerable size."

"Received," snapped Brady, flicking off the switch. "It's them for sure and right on time. With the biggest cruiser they could find." He laughed and reached for another switch. "Plot?" he asked. "Brady, here. Give me range and bearing of flareship in relation to vessels just reported."

There was an instant's pause before the loudspeaker reported, "Flareship two million minus, one-three-two degrees green, with elevation one-seven. Approximate distance from group three hundred thousand."

"Report when the flareship is astern of the group at distance of one hundred thousand," ordered Brady, and switched off after hearing the acknowledgment. To Murphy he said, "In about two minutes."

The intercom buzzed again. "Flareship in position, sir."

"Ignitel" rapped Brady, and in the Plot Control room, the officer in charge pressed the remote control switch. Two million miles away the flareship exploded, glowed briefly in the blackness of space, and was gone.

Brady listened only half consciously to the lieutenant's, "Flareship ignited, sir."

In his mind he asked himself: *Would the Centaurans go on? Or would they play safe and turn back?* He turned to Murphy and nodded. "Send away the decoy, Mr. Murphy," he said. "We don't know how long it'll be before the Centauran escorts get back to look into it—if they come back."

Murphy smiled confidently. "They'll come, all right. Even a blind man couldn't miss a flareship of that size going off."

"Don't be too sure. If they do miss it, they'll never believe us later on when their ambassadors' ship has disappeared. That's the whole hinge of the plan: we must establish an alibi before that cruiser disappears; afterwards will be too late."

Murphy nodded. "I'll get the ship away."

Brady heard the roar of the take-off rockets five minutes later, and watched through the transparent dome of the Control Room as one of the other two ships mounted to the black sky on golden jets of flame. If Franklin, in command of the two decoy Earth ships, was doing his part properly, the sudden appearance of the ship from Triton would never be noticed. He sighed and mentally crossed his fingers. The next few hours would tell the difference between the success or failure of his mission.

Murphy returned a minute or so later, and he was still looking out of the port.

"Decoy away, sir."

"I've got eyes," snarled Brady, then regretted his outburst. "Sorry, Mr. Murphy, I've got the jumps. I think I'll turn in for a while, so call me as soon as the decoy returns."

Brady lay down on his bunk fully dressed, knowing he would not sleep, but glad to get away from the confinement of the control room.

His eyes rested unseeing on the deckhead above his bunk, and against its dull, gray background he followed in his mind the progress of the plan he had placed before the President six months before.

At first it had been received with ridicule; Bannerman himself had condemned it as a schoolboy device, too transparent to fool anyone but another schoolboy. But gradually his points had been driven home, one by one, until the whole idea had been accepted. He had the backing of the politico-psychologists on the major point of what type of ship the Centaurans would send in answer to the Earth government's servile invitation asking them to look over the Solar system.

At was expected, the Centaurans were eager to send representatives to the Solar system, and it was agreed that an escort of two Earth ships would be sent to guide them from an agreed point just beyond the orbit of Pluto, to the Earth. The Centaurans' own convoy of six ships, the largest of which would carry the diplomats, would join up with the two Earth vessels, and the five remaining Centauran ships would await the return of the ambassadors at the same point.

But, Brady sighed, there were so many ways in which the scheme could go wrong. Perhaps the ambassadors' ship would turn back in alarm when it detected the explosion

of the flareship. But that obstacle was passed. Perhaps the other five Centauran ships would fail to spot the explosion, or if they did, perhaps they would ignore it. Perhaps the ambassadors' ship would decide to get in touch with the other Centauran ships after the explosion; in that case the decoy was running into a certain trap if they tried to tell the story about the convoy being destroyed by a local phenomenon known as a "thunderbolt."

Even with doubt strong in his heart, Brady chuckled to himself. That had been the best stroke of all. He imagined Faulkner, on the decoy, explaining how the Solar system harbored a peculiar phenomenon: a mobile and natural force field, not large, but potentially fatal to any ship which collided with it and was not insulated. Not knowing the phenomenon to be confined to their own system, the Earthmen had assumed the Centauran ship would be insulated against it, and since that was not the case, and they had encountered a "thunderbolt," the Centauran ship and one of the Earth vessels had been destroyed in the resulting explosion. The decoy, faked up to appear badly damaged in the explosion it was to report, would be concrete evidence of the disaster.

Brady slept soundly for three hours before he was awakened by Murphy knocking on his cabin door.

He was wide awake in an instant, and he knew what Murphy was going to say even before he reported, "Decoy returning, sir."

He was in the control room in time to see the ship come down to rest near its previous position in the valley, and he waited impatiently for the arrival of Faulkner, its commander.

The chubby, red-faced lieutenant literally bounded into the cabin, his eyes gleaming and his face wreathed in smiles.

"They swallowed it hook, line and sinker, sir," he gasped excitedly.

"We met them barely an hour out from the point where the flaeship went up. They must have come in awfully fast—if we'd been ten minutes later our direction would have been suspicious. I told them the whole story and let them inspect the ship. They were in a terrific flap at first, but they calmed down later and gave us some help with repairs. I said I was returning to Earth to report, and that no doubt they would wish to report back to their own government."

"And they went?"

"Like lambs, sir," replied Faulkner. "I think they were too upset to think straight. Frankly, I've never seen anyone in such a panic; but the story hit home all right, there's no doubt."

Brady bared his teeth in a grin of triumph, and turned to Murphy.

"Get this message off to the President at once: *Plan successful. Prepare reception for one large Centauran cruiser. Sign my name and send it in code by closed beam.*"

Six hours later, as they were preparing to leave for Earth, Murphy brought a message to Brady, his face agleam with excitement. He handed it over without a word.

Brady ripped it open with eager fingers. One line of type read: *They're in the bag. Congratulations. Bannerman.*

He let out a long sigh of relief and turned a flushed face to his second in command. "You needn't look so pleased, Mister Murphy," he scolded in a voice which belied his words. "This is just the beginning. We've started something that we may not be able to finish, and we may be sorry before we're through. Take off for Earth in fifteen minutes."

For the second time in less than a year, Commander Brady led a victorious squadron back to White Sands Space-

port. and it was a grinning General Drummond who shook him warmly by the hand in his office.

"I know," said Brady, before Drummond could speak, "you didn't expect us back."

Drummond laughed. "It's getting to be a habit with you, Captain."

The smile slipped from Brady's face. "Captain?" he queried.

Drummond nodded. "Congratulations; the order came direct from the office of the President this morning, to await your arrival. That Lieutenant Murphy of yours gets a lift up, too."

Brady grinned with undisguised pleasure. He had no illusions about the length of time he would normally have had to wait for his extra star, had it not been for this successful mission.

"Tell me, sir," he asked, "how did it go?"

"They came into it like lambs to the slaughter," replied Drummond.

"They had a welcoming committee to put them at their ease, and they just had time to find out what that mysterious flash was they spotted not far from Neptune. Do you know about that?" Drummond cocked a quizzical eye at Brady.

"Not a thing, not one little thing." Brady was all innocence for a moment before breaking into a gust of laughter in which the General joined.

"Well," went on Drummond after a moment, "they just had time to discover the answer before we flooded the place with gas. No warning, no smell, no trouble. They went out like lights, the lot of them. Of course it put out our welcoming committee as well, but they didn't mind that; they were expecting it anyway."

Brady sat back in his chair. "Where are they now?" he inquired.

"They are lying stripped of their weapons, and anything else that might be useful, in an impregnable fortress on a

remote island in the middle of one of the great oceans of one of the three inhabited planets of the Solar system," returned Drummond pompously.

Brady lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

"That's all you're going to know, Captain," said Drummond. "It's the President's idea. The fewer people who know about it the better, just in case the escort didn't swallow that story, and we get a few spies poking around to find out what really happened. Their ship has been taken care of, too—we've got half the scientists in the system working on it right now."

Brady nodded. "Yes, I guess it's as well; we must be careful from here on in. It's going one step at a time and very little leeway on the side of error."

"Oh, by the way," interrupted Drummond, "you have also been appointed special adviser to the President for the duration of the crisis. You're to report to him at Peace River as soon as possible, and leave your squadron in command of Murphy."

"Is it still my squadron?" asked Brady.

Drummond nodded. "Yes, it's yours to do with as you please. Even Space Control can't touch it unless you agree."

Brady smiled. "I'll get along to Peace River at once, sir. Doesn't do to keep the President waiting too long."

"Not this one, anyway," agreed Drummond, rising and shaking hands. "He's one of those rare birds who believe in getting things done."

Brady laughed, "Goodbye, sir, see you soon."

The President greeted Brady cordially and congratulated him upon his success.

"Well, thank you, sir," smiled Brady. "I just hope the Centaurans are no smarter than they seem."

Bannerman grinned broadly. "We're not giving them a chance to doubt us."

Brady looked suitably interested.

"Before they have time to do much thinking about it, I'm sending them my condolences at the loss of their ship, pointing out, diplomatically, that we also suffered a loss as a result of the accident, and asking them to send another ambassadorial mission. I shall tell them that this time we ourselves will insulate their ship against 'thunderbolts.'"

Brady smiled his approval. "I think that's smart, sir; they certainly won't have much time to get their breath. But what happens when the next load comes—if it comes?"

"They'll come all right," Bannerman assured him, "and when they do they will be treated with respect and cordiality. But they will be told nothing and they will see only what is placed for them to see. Everything else will be very carefully concealed. We shall see to it that they go home having apparently created an impression by their visit, but we shall make absolutely sure that they are not given any impression whatsoever about the possibility of our joining the Rihnan empire. If we are friendly, I don't think they will bother us for, perhaps, as long as three years."

"Can we do enough, sir? That's the point," put in Brady, dubiously.

"We've got to," returned Bannerman. "Three years is my minimum figure; we may have longer but we can't be sure of that. That's why I've called you in as my adviser. You know more about this business than anyone, myself included."

"Thank you, sir." Brady blushed at the compliment.

"All right," said Bannerman, "now get out of here. My secretary will get you settled."

As Bannerman had predicted, the second invitation was accepted as enthusiastically as the first had been. The Centauran ambassadors arrived and were received with all the proper deference and ceremony. Their visit lasted two months,

during which time they were most strongly affected by the deep impression they seemed to make on these backward people. This was highly flattering and left them feeling very kindly disposed toward the charming Earthmen. It was all very skillfully done.

In the meanwhile, reports from the underground laboratories in Siberia indicated that work on the Rihnan armaments was progressing at a rate far exceeding the most optimistic hopes. So rapidly did the scientists claim to be breaking the Rihnan secrets that President Bannerman became a little suspicious. He sent Brady to Siberia to confirm the truth of the reports.

In Siberia, Brady met Professor Hartmann, the gruff, surly head of the Rihnan project, and his assistant, Ben Wilson, the foremost electronics expert of the Solar system. The two savants convinced him that Rihnan invincibility was a myth. They admitted that Rihnan technology was indeed superior to that of the Three Planets, but it was not incomprehensible, not inimitable. The fact that Centaurs and the other races of the Universe were fooled by it merely indicated that Humans were more intelligent than these species.

Brady left Siberia in a buoyant frame of mind. The scientists were hopeful that they would not merely copy the Rihnan armaments within the time limit anticipated by Bannerman, but that they would improve on them as well. Brady knew the future was uncertain, but he felt, now, that there was at least a chance for Humanity, that all hope was not yet dead.

III

THE SILVER squadron of ships glinted brilliantly in the light of the afternoon sun as they flew in formation across the cloudless blue sky. Stephen Brady stood for a moment watching them as he climbed from his car outside the President's residence. It was summer, but the cool breeze from the hills offset the effects of the burning sun, and Peace River was certainly peaceful.

He watched the squadron until it vanished over the horizon and stood for a moment afterwards awed by the apparent peace of the Universe in this gorgeous summer of 2228 Anno Domini. The threat of Galactic war was not yet palpable enough to frighten the average man into awareness of the gigantic issues at stake. To most people, the gradual appearance over the past four years of great, heavily armed battle fleets, was merely a logical consequence of space exploration.

The periodic official announcements of new weapons, and the building of new ships were greeted with an almost antipathetic disinterest, and the only shouts were from the few people who begrudged the giant sums allocated to the Triplanetary budget.

Gradually the fleets had been built up but not one of the huge ships was allowed outside the orbit of the particular planet on which it was built, and constant scouting by older type vessels was maintained to make certain that no Centaurans came calling unannounced.

After four years of work and hope, the preparations were completed. Brady sighed and turned into the main

entrance of the President's vacation home. He frankly doubted that they were ready enough: they could do with twice as many ships and men, and they would be glad of a dozen greater and more powerful weapons. But the demands of war were always insatiable, and they were as ready now as they would be in another six months. He doubted if they would have that much more time.

The President's secretary greeted him in the anteroom and broke his train of thought.

"He will see you straight away, Captain Brady. I was told to send you in as soon as you arrived."

Brady smiled and nodded absently, passing through into Bannerman's private suite. The President was seated in an easy chair by the large French window, but he rose when Brady entered and shook his hand warmly.

"Glad to see you back, Brady."

"Thank you, sir."

Brady took the seat offered to him opposite the President, and when he had made himself comfortable, Bannerman said: "First, let me hear what you've got for news."

"Well, sir, is doesn't look too bad at first sight, but knowing what we're likely to be up against, it doesn't look too good either. Venus and Mars are on schedule with ship and armament production, but the shortage of technicians is liable to become serious. Those Mars tests on the new type protective screen and the A-type radiation weapons show that they are definitely superior to anything we found on the captured ship. Hartmann and his boys did a grand job. We have a total of nine hundred first line heavy cruisers, fully manned and at peak efficiency, plus another two thousand smaller craft ranging from destroyer types to three-man mosquitoes. The combined output of the Three Planets by the end of the current year will be ninety-six more heavy cruisers and three hundred and twenty lighter vessels, but there will be fully trained crews for only half

that number. In twelve months there is likely to be a disparity of over seventy percent."

Brady flipped shut the small notebook which he had been consulting during his recital. "That is the overall picture, sir; the smaller details and the other minor parts will be given in my official written report."

Bannerman nodded and sat back in his chair, his eyes gazing out of the window and over the river as it glistened in the afternoon sun.

"You needn't worry about it, Brady." His voice was mild and unperturbed. "We haven't got that much time."

Brady tensed in his chair, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"You've had another note from the Centaurans, sir?"

Bannerman nodded. "Yes, three days ago, and it's a final one. They've got tired of being put off every time they approach us, and I suspect that the Rihnans have been putting pressure on them to force us into the Empire, or else—"

"But why should they worry so much about us? We've done nothing to harm them."

"No state or empire can stand competition no matter how small and seemingly unimportant that competition is. That is the lesson of our history books and I suspect that the galactic scheme of things does not differ in fundamental principles. Anyway, we have eight weeks, roughly, in which to decide which course we will follow—surrender or extinction."

"And you have decided." Brady made the statement flatly and grimly.

"Yes," replied Bannerman, "we shall pursue the policy we laid down in the beginning. I have the agreement of the heads of the armed forces to that effect, and they also agree with me that, while it may be disastrous, even fatal to the human race, we must take that chance. Once this

one has passed we may never get another. We are as ready as we shall ever be, and if we do not succeed with what we have I do not think we shall be successful with more."

"I agree, sir," Brady replied.

"I imagined you would. I have signed an order this morning placing the joint fleets of the Three Planets on a full war basis under the command of Grand Admiral Richmond. We shall not dispatch a reply to the Centaurans until just before the expiration of the time limit, and when we do it will be couched in such unmistakable terms as to leave no doubt of our intention to pursue a course outside the orbit of the Rihnan empire."

Brady shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Don't think me selfish, sir," he began awkwardly, "but might I ask about my own personal assignment?"

"I thought you might," Bannerman smiled. "You'd like a space command, I know, but frankly, I would prefer to have you with me. If war should come—as I have no doubt it will—and we should, by the grace of God, emerge victorious, I'll need men like you around me, and I can't have them risking their necks in a front-line battle cruiser."

"I understand." Nevertheless, Brady felt a pang of disappointment. He realized suddenly that all his hopes had been centered around the possibility of commanding one of the giant new cruisers which would be the front line of any Terran force that met a hostile enemy.

His disappointment must have shown in his face, for Bannerman smiled sympathetically.

"Your time will come, Captain," he promised. "If we are at all successful in the initial operations, speed in following up our advantage will be vital, and your advice and experience will be invaluable. After all," his eyes twinkled, "you know more about these aliens than anyone."

Brady smiled at the compliment. "What are the operational plans, sir?" he inquired, changing the subject.

Bannerman studied his fingertips carefully for a moment while he marshalled his thoughts.

"The fleet will be divided into three groups. The first group based on Phobos and Diemos to protect Mars, the second and largest will be based on the Moon to protect Earth and Venus, and the third, the smallest group, will be held in secret on Uranus, firstly as a reserve if we need it, and lastly to cut off any Centauran retreat that the other two fleets may be able to force."

"The Chiefs of Staff are pretty optimistic."

"They can't afford to be otherwise," pointed out Bannerman. "In our position we dare not be cautious; we must take the initiative right from the beginning and never let it slip. Certainly, we could sit back and try to protect the Three Planets but where would that get us in the long run? We are not in a position to fight an entirely defensive war against the odds which are likely to be put against us. We've got to take offensive action as soon as possible."

Brady nodded his agreement. "I don't think the Centaurans will be looking for trouble if they do come against us," he said speculatively. "After all, they have no reason to regard this as anything other than one of their usual taming expeditions. If we get in early with a surprise blow, it might throw them off balance and give us the opportunity to do more damage than might otherwise be possible. Surprise might be the one critical factor."

"The reply to the Centaurans will be sent a week before the deadline," continued the President more soberly, "and by that time the fleets will be in position. We can do no more until the Centaurans make the next move, and I do not believe it will be other than hostile."

"We must assume so, sir." Brady rose to his feet. "And

now, if I have your permission to leave, I have to submit a copy of my written report to the Armed Forces Directorate."

The Centauran battle fleet came in past the orbit of Pluto ten days after its government received the Terran reply to their note. The haste with which they dispatched their fleet was caused by the strong rebukes they received from the Central Galactic Council for their mishandling of the whole affair.

The main fleet was dispatched with all possible speed to exact retribution for the insolence which had repaid their friendly overtures. The fleet Commander had orders to damage but not destroy, to cripple but not kill; he would do as much damage as he could without actually eliminating the race of upstarts who inhabited the three planets of Sol. He and his ships approached their task with blind confidence, and without attempting to ascertain whether any possible danger lurked within the confines of the Solar system. They had carefully insulated their ships against the mysterious thunderbolts that were supposed to have destroyed their ambassadorial ship several years before, by faithfully copying the wiring installed by Terran technicians on the second ship. Their own technical staff took it as a sign of scientific backwardness on the part of the Terrans that they were able to duplicate it. It never occurred to them that its simplicity was in direct ratio to its uselessness.

The fleet came in one force, with no scouts and with no preparation against attack other than the defensive screens which they maintained rather as a matter of habit than otherwise.

News of their coming was flashed Earthwards by automatic plotting stations situated on the satellites of Pluto and Saturn, stations which did their job with complete accuracy before vanishing in the destructive blasts of small cruisers dispatched from the main fleet for that purpose.

The fleet Commander expressed some surprise at the advanced methods of observation and tracking which the Terrans seemed to have developed, but so confident was he in the power at his disposal that he was not warned to expect more than a token resistance from the Three Planets. Even had he thought so far ahead, it is doubtful that he would have been sufficiently prepared for the full scale battle in which his fleets soon found themselves engaged.

Earth and Venus were their closest points of approach, and the Centaurans did exactly what the Terran tacticians had expected them to do: they decided to deal with the Earth first, and then proceed to Venus. A portion of the fleet, some six hundred heavy cruisers, was dispatched to deal with Mars, and the remainder proceeded serenely on to Earth.

They passed, unsuspectingly, within a hundred thousand miles of Earth's single satellite, and had lined their fleets in ranks pointing directly Earthward, when the blow fell. Their lack of observation was partly responsible for their downfall. Since they had passed the Moon without any sign of trouble, they had relaxed what little vigilance was being maintained, and did not see the three hundred Terran vessels which swooped on them from the shelter of the satellite. Before they realized what had hit them, the rear line of the fleet formation, sixteen ships, had vanished in the flaming holocaust of fire which the Terran fleet poured into them from the rear.

Then came the most horrible shock of all. Their defense screens were completely ineffective. The Centauran Commander, at the head of his force, watched helplessly as ship after ship behind him flashed to destruction, while the remainder scattered like autumn leaves before the gale of fire which the comparatively small Earth force poured at them.

It was not a battle, it was a rout; and there was such destruction done as only the Centaurans could have imagined before it occurred, and that only because they expected to wreak it.

The Terran force attacked in three columns of one hundred ships each, striking, like lances, straight through the ranked lines of their opponents. The flashes of atomic force-beams flickered like lightning over the hulls of the Centauran ships, thrusting aside the protective screens, which were their main defense, as if they were cobwebs. Ship after ship vanished in a torrent of erupting flame that blinded the attackers as much as their prey.

Outnumbered as they had expected by ten to one, the men of the Terran ships had grimly resigned themselves to almost certain death, and had determined to do as much damage as they could before themselves being wiped out. But the expected retaliation did not materialize; a handful of Centauran ships turned to fight off the destruction engulfing them, only to find that their weapons were as useless as their defenses. The attackers still came on, rocked by the forces flung at them, but otherwise unharmed.

In twenty minutes it was all over. No fleet could have re-formed into an effective force after the mauling the Centaurans had received. The jubilant Earth ships ran riot through the demoralized groups of the enemy, as they realized that they were, themselves, invulnerable. Sixteen ships only were lost, and those through accidental collisions with the Centauran ships, but of the three thousand which the enemy had sent against them, only four hundred and sixty fled from the scene of battle in terror, and those perished at the hands of the ambush fleet off Uranus.

Forty-seven ships landed on the Moon and surrendered to the Lunar Station; a hundred and seven more did likewise on Earth itself, and of the six hundred which had flown

toward Mars, only thirty-two survived to give themselves up. It was the first and last great space battle within the Solar System, and it was over in exactly twenty minutes.

IV

IT WAS night at Lake Success, a clear moonlit night when the stars shone with an even clarity like a million tiny lamps on a giant Christmas tree. It was the night of the battle, the battle to save humanity.

Brady had not left the main operations room for twelve hours, and with two score or more other officials he had watched as, one by one, the white bulbs on the detector board flicked out. Each one denoted the destruction of another plotting station. No comment was made, for there was no need. The three fleets had strict orders not to communicate with Earth or with each other until they had been either successful or defeated.

The pile of stubs mounted in the ashtray beside Brady's seat, and minute by minute, hour by hour the tension grew. It was three forty-five when a watcher on the electronic telescope reported flashes in the vicinity of the Moon.

Brady left his seat and crossed eagerly to the instrument. "Let me see" he ordered.

The man slid over and relinquished the eyepiece to him.

"I've got it trained right on the largest group, sir," he said, "but even with this we can't get any greater magnification."

Brady waited until his eyes became accustomed to the black void revealed in the eyepiece of the telescope, but after a moment, just as the operator had said, he could make out a vivid series of flashes streaking the blackness

of space. The flashes did not dim the stars; they were too weak for meteors, and too irregular.

He watched for a long minute while the others, who had heard the news, came up and crowded round anxiously. At last he lifted his head and stood up, motioning the operator to continue his observations. He looked up at the circle of men around him, each face grimly questioning, some white with anticipation.

He nodded. "All hell is breaking loose out there. There must be a battle going on about a quarter of a million miles out; it's the Moon fleet for sure, and the Centaurans are right on time."

There were muttered exclamations as he finished, but he waved them aside.

"I'm going to report to the President. If there is going to be trouble we should know in less than an hour, so if I'm not back send up a message when something breaks."

He pushed through the crowd and left the room, taking the elevator up to the penthouse where the President had his private suite. The guard on the door passed him through without hesitation and the secretary inside motioned him to go straight into the President's office.

"He's like the rest of us, Captain—can't sleep."

Brady grinned wearily; he could well imagine.

Bannerman was standing by the window looking out at the myriad lights of the city below. The room was lit only by a small lamp on his desk. He turned as Brady entered, and said, "Hello, Brady. What's the mater? Conscience keep you awake?"

"You too, sir?" returned Brady with a smile.

Bannerman laughed outright. "Sit down. In my case I shouldn't be at all surprised," he answered. "Conscience wasn't my strong point ever. How else do you think I got to be President?" He settled himself in another chair. "Well,

I guess you've got some news; otherwise you wouldn't be here at this unearthly hour."

"Yes, sir. There appears to be a space battle in progress some quarter of a million miles out. We can detect it through the electronoscope, but we can't make out the details. I thought you'd want to know about it."

Bannerman nodded. "So this is it," he said grimly. "How long do you think it'll be before we know anything definite?"

Brady shrugged, "Hard to tell—maybe an hour, maybe twelve. It all depends."

"On how good our boys are, is that it?"

"Yes."

"And how good those weapons are."

"Yes, sir, that more than anything," agreed Brady. "If they're not good enough, then it won't matter a damn how good our boys are. It won't matter at all." He voiced the conviction gloomily.

Bannerman sat back in his chair and swiveled it slightly until he was looking out of the window. He waved a hand toward it and said, "Take a look out there, Brady. I wonder if you see what I see?"

Brady followed his gaze. The lights of the city threw a dim, yellowish aura against the window, but even through that glow he could see the stars gleaming and winking against an ebony sky. Dawn was two hours away.

"Yes, sir, it's a lovely night," he replied.

"No, that's not what I mean, Captain." Bannerman shook his head. "I've been looking out of that window for over two hours waiting for you to come and give me some news. I've been watching the stars flicker out there, some of them brightly, some of them faintly, and thinking that for every one that I can see, there are a thousand I can't.

"Out there is the greatest empire in the Universe, the greatest because it is just that, the Universe. Men have known of it and dreamed of it for over a thousand years; they have

woven their ambitions about it, they have told stories about it, and they have worked for centuries with only one end in view, to conquer it. We are the lucky ones who may see the culmination of all the strife that has gone toward making those dreams come true, and tonight, out there, some of us are dying in the attempt, not because we are ready for it but because we have had it thrust upon us.

"We have reached our destiny a thousand years before it was due simply because others would not leave us in peace. Tonight we die, or tonight the human race becomes the greatest single force the Galaxy has ever known. I have been wondering if we are ready for it, if we are strong enough to hold it together; for if we are not, even though we may beat the living daylights out of the Rihnans and their stooges, then the Galaxy will revert to uncivilized savagery, and we shall have destroyed the one thing which has kept it together for so long."

He stopped speaking as the phone on his desk buzzed. Brady rose and crossed to the desk, flicking up the switch that activated the intercom.

"President's office. Brady here."

"Captain Brady, Operations here." The voice was quick and excited. "Report from Lunar Station, sir. It reads: *From Admiral commanding Terran Fleet number one to the President. Enemy forces completely destroyed. They have ceased to exist as an effective fighting force. Survivors heading out toward Uranus. Unknown number have landed on Moon to surrender. Terran losses sixteen ships, enemy losses two thousand plus. Message ends.*"

Brady's face was white with excitement, "Report received," he snapped. "Operations, I'm leaving this line open for further information. Shoot it straight through as soon as it comes to hand."

He turned to face Bannerman who was still sitting in his chair, his eyes turned to the window. As the President turned

toward him, the phone buzzed briefly and the same voice called, "Report from Lunar Station. It reads. *From Commander Lunar Station to President. Thirty-six ships of enemy classification so far landed to surrender, others still coming in. Report from Earth Fleet number Two beamed from Phobos states four hundred plus enemy ships destroyed in fifteen minute battle. Further report follows. End of message.*"

Brady stood with eyes aflame, his body literally trembling with excitement.

"Don't look so pleased, Captain," Bannerman remarked with a smile. "Now our troubles really begin."

Before Brady could answer, the desk phone buzzed.

"Message from Commander Lunar Station to President. *Enemy flagship has surrendered together with six more vessels. Total now forty-five. Terran fleet is returning to base and is standing by for further orders. Mars fleet reports seven ships lost. Thirty-one of the enemy have so far surrendered. End of message.*"

Brady turned from the phone. "It's all over but the shouting."

Bannerman puffed thoughtfully at his pipe, his brow creased. He said, "I wonder?"

"You wonder what, sir?"

"Just an idea." He sat up suddenly and faced Brady. "Have that enemy flagship brought to Earth, Brady. I think we may be able to make use of it."

Meron, capital city of the Centauran system, was situated on the fourth planet of the star Ortan or Alpha Centauri. It was a giant city, even by Terran standards, including some two hundred square miles of territory within its circumference.

The giant spaceport, the military center of the Centauran system, was situated some twenty miles from Meron,

and was linked to the city by a great underground tunnel carrying nothing but official traffic. The buildings that housed their government, and the great spaceport was no less an object of pride to them, for it could serve, without crowding, the entire Centauran fleet of over three thousand craft.

It was from Meron spaceport that the Centauran fleet was dispatched against the Solar system, and having sent it on its mission of destruction, and basked in the impressive sight of its glittering departure, the Centaurans forgot all about it. Slight mention was made, in official circles, that the fleet would be returning in a few weeks, but the manner of its return caused no speculation whatsoever. It was totally inconceivable even to imagine that it would not return victorious.

One day a solitary ship limped slowly toward the spaceport, heading in from outer space in a long, low curve that brought it, with mathematical precision, to the main landing ramp on the field. At first, as it approached, not much notice was taken of its erratic behavior. The few ground staff members who saw it took it to be an interplanetary passenger ship with mechanical trouble. On its first circuit of the field someone noticed that it was, to say the least, in a very sorry state. Its after guide-wings were completely gone, accounting for its erratic course; its nose was partially blasted off giving it a blunt, ungainly snout, and there were three large holes in the main hull, which appeared to have been caused by heavy explosions. Such details, once spotted, aroused more than apathetic interest in the field control room, and while such details could be seen readily without optical aids, the identity of the vessel was still not clear, until a pair of glasses was trained on it.

Within seconds, utter confusion and panic swept through the spaceport buildings, for through the glasses, plainly and for all to see, the name of the vessel stood out like a beacon.

It was the *Lyra Comet*, and the *Lyra Comet* was the flagship of the fleet that had been sent against the Solar system. The fact that the flagship had returned sent confused officers hurriedly sweeping the skies for signs of the rest of the fleet, and panic mounted as the detectors swept deeper and deeper into space and found nothing. The *Lyra Comet* was the only vessel within a million miles of the planet.

It took the local Commander mere seconds to reach the field through the underground approach from the city, and he arrived just in time to see the ship brought safely, if somewhat bumpily, to the ground.

The landing ramp was shifted hurriedly alongside the entry port, and a ground party waited anxiously for the crew to disembark. As they and the group in the control room watched with mounting apprehension, the entry port swung slowly open until a space about three feet wide was showing; there it stopped, and through the gap was thrown, by an unseen hand, a round metal container. It bumped and jolted down the ramp and rattled metallically on the ground in front of a bewildered and uneasy group of officials. The door slammed shut again.

The group at the foot of the ramp eyed the container warily, too fascinated to leave the spot, but afraid to touch the strange object. It was an irate Commander who finally ordered them, through the loudspeaker, to bring the contents of the container to him at once, and it was a cautious Commander who ordered them to see what was inside before they came any nearer to the main control room.

One of the group reached unwillingly for the container and pulled reluctantly at the already loosened lid, which came off suddenly and without any trouble at all. Inside was a single sheet of paper heavily engraved with Centaurian lettering. When the missive was brought to him, the Com-

mander snatched it and began to read the incredible document.

"Listen to this!" he thundered. *"This ship, which we believe to be the flagship of the fleet sent against the Solar System, is the only surviving craft of that fleet. It is now manned by officers and men of the United Terran Space Fleets.*

We have come on a peaceful mission and have no desire to provoke hostilities unless such action is forced upon us. We come as the official representatives of the Solar Empire, to request the surrender of the Centauran armed forces, and to exact a recognition by the Centauran government that the total defeat of their forces by those of the Solar Empire has been effected. In acknowledging the Centauran defeat, you will accede to our demand that all conquered territories which have taken warlike action against us shall, henceforth, be included as subservient portions of the Solar Empire, and shall pay tribute and conduct themselves in accordance with their new position.

If, in due course, these territories show themselves to be amenable and loyal to the wishes and ambitions of the Solar Empire, then they will be raised to the status of self-governing States within the compass of the Empire. We wish to send delegates to your government to accept formal surrender, and we desire that some sign be given us as a guarantee that safe escort shall be provided for these, the accredited ambassadors of the Solar Empire."

As the Commander ended, complete, deathly and astounded silence cloaked the room. The other occupants gaped wordlessly at him and at each other, for there were no words in their, or any other vocabulary to express their feeling at that moment.

V

THE FIRST sound to break the silence was the voice of the Commander as faint and unnatural goblins issued from him. His first coherent words were: "Blast that ship off the field! Turn the atomizers on them and clear them off the field. Jump to it, don't just stand there. Do something!"

He rose from his seat, and the movement galvanized his assistant into action. He rushed to the communicator and shouted, in a voice that hovered on the verge of panic, "Atomizer batteries two and three—blast that ship off the field. Yes, Commander's orders."

The occupants of the control room then turned their attention to the ship, and what they saw gave them another, if lesser shock. While their attention had been focused on the letter, the ship had acquired a bright golden glow that enveloped its entire hull in an aura of shimmering light. They had only seconds to observe and note this phenomenon before the preliminary blue flash of the atomizers lit the field. A fraction of a second later the blue ray of their beams covered the intervening space to the ship—and the two batteries blew up with a shattering crash that rocked every building for miles around and broke every window in the control room.

The Commander was the first to pick himself up shakily from the floor where three others lay groaning, two gashed by flying splinters from the window, and the third stunned by hitting a piece of furniture as he fell.

The Commander recovered his senses with remarkable rapidity, and he seized upon the only explanation which his reeling mind could conjure up.

He mumbled, "Fools probably forgot to put up their defenses and those fiends have turned our own weapons on us. Get one and four on the job."

The assistant shouted the order into the communicator and all of them watched, dazed and unbelieving, as one and four went the way of two and three.

The Commander himself ordered the Diffusion Ray into action, and felt his already shattered senses reel sickeningly as it went the same way as the Atomizers. The spaceport, by that time, was almost completely wrecked and panic seized the city as the unexplained detonations continued at irregular intervals. The only thing apparently unaffected for thirty miles around was the unmoved and strangely glowing ship on the landing ramp.

Inside the ship, Captain Brady and his crew of eight hundred watched the fiery scene outside as the Firebeam followed the Diffusion Ray, and the Neutronic Disintegrator followed the Firebeam.

"Though why we have to go to all this trouble, I can't for the life of me make out," remarked Commander Murphy, his second in command.

"Psychology," replied Brady with dark understanding. "Keep them ignorant and keep them guessing. It's all been worked out by better brains than yours, Murphy."

"I still don't get it."

"Bannerman saw the difficulties before anyone else," Brady told him. "Once we had defeated them how were we going to take over the Centauran system without tipping off the Rihnans? He realized that we couldn't just sent in four or five hundred battle cruisers; they would have been spotted before they got within ten light years. So we send in one ship, make it one of their own, and they won't even notice it. And that is about what happened."

"I still think it would have been better to blast in as

soon as possible with every available ship and grab the system before they could do anything about it," insisted Murphy.

Brady laughed. "Bull at a gate attitude. First of all, they don't know what happened to their fleet; second, they can't imagine how we got hold of their flagship; third, they never had anything go wrong with their weapons before, and fourth and most important, they have never in their whole existence been faced with a situation like this. They're like mice that are suddenly confronted with a dozen horribly efficient mousetraps in a world where they usually have to worry about one inefficient one. The one trap they think a way round, a dozen they go round in circles."

Murphy sighed: "If you say so."

"I don't. The psychologists thought that one up."

By now all was quiet outside, and Brady surmised, quite rightly, that the local commander had used up all his resources and was shrieking blue murder for assistance.

"Presently," remarked Brady prophetically, "they'll bring up their spare cruisers to do the job for them, and after they have been disposed of we'll go out and meet them with suits on."

It took rather longer than Brady suggested, mainly because the Commander was too badly shaken to give a coherent enough account of the catastrophic events to the Centauran government to send a reconnaissance vessel over the field. After the report from that vessel, they hurriedly amassed all available warships on the planet and organized an impromptu task force.

The Grand Council of the Centauran Government watched with ever-growing horror and dismay as ship after ship dived to the attack—and vanished in a thunderous explosion and a brilliant display of fireworks. Finally the few survivors gave up and returned to base, while a panic-stricken council tried in vain to explain the staggering defeat.

Complete peace settled over the area of the spaceport after the withdrawal of the surviving Centauran ships, although Brady could see figures moving among the ruins of the buildings. He waited an hour, then lowered the screen to eject another message requesting an immediate audience with the government. The container was thrown well outside the circle of golden glow which was, in effect, a defensive screen of far greater efficiency than any known to the Centaurans. The screen was switched up again and they settled down to another wait.

Murphy doubted that there was anyone left with enough nerve to fetch the message, after the calamities of the past few hours.

"They'll come," promised Brady grimly. "If not we'll blast one of those buildings on the other side of the field. They'll catch on quickly enough, then."

It was several hours later that Brady and Murphy, accompanied by six scientists, economists and psycho-politicians, made their way into the Centauran Council hall with a self-confidence that surprised even the downcast Council members. They had expected the Earthmen's entry to be confident, but they were not prepared for the bombastic swagger with which the party took complete control of the situation.

As Brady had said to Murphy before they left the ship, "According to the psychologists, the Centaurans must be suffering from an inferiority complex for the first time in their existence, and if we put on a sufficiently blatant display for their benefit we shall get all we want just for the asking."

"I'd have thought the Rihnans would have given them a complex long before this," remarked Murphy.

"For once," Brady told him, "Bannermann has ordered me to follow the advice of my experts, and not to act too much on

my own initiative. After all, he started this plan, so it's up to us to see that it goes the way he wants it."

Despite the psychologists' assurances that the Centaurans were too badly shaken to do any damage, Brady ordered that the landing party wear protective suits. They were bulky and unwieldy, but would protect the wearer against any known form of atom blast. Had the Centaurans known it, the suits were descended from the Rihnan defense against the Neutronic Novabomb. But they did not know, and all knowledge as to how Earth had obtained her superior weapons was withheld from them as long as possible. That was one point which the psychologists had overlooked, and Brady did not realize it at the time. It was only later that the point became plain.

The Council members had arranged themselves as imposingly as they could around the large rostrum at one end of the chamber, in the hope that they might gain some material advantage if they could awe their visitors sufficiently. They were, as a result, totally unprepared for the confident entry of a little group of eight men, all dressed in dull grey suits projecting a peculiar golden aura. They entered quickly and determinedly, bringing with them a large machine in its component parts, which they proceeded to erect in the center of the floor before the rostrum. They paid no attention whatever to the now bewildered Council, which had expected, at the very least, a slight show of its accustomed deference, and which was totally confused when it wasn't forthcoming.

The President would, under other circumstances have taken action against such a display of impudence. But he was so astounded by the bombastic entry of the Earthmen that, by the time he had partially decided what to do, the apparatus was in position and the group had commandeered eight seats which they placed in a semi-circle around it, facing the rostrum.

Brady wasted no time beginning the discussion. He picked up a microphone connected to the Ora-cerebral Translator, and informed the Council tersely that the equipment was for the purpose of allowing two people of different species to talk to each other with no difficulty, even though they had no knowledge of each other's language. He handed the President another microphone in order, as he put it, that the conversation should not be too one-sided.

Having established contact, Brady went on to read a carefully prepared statement, written for the occasion by the politico-psychologists. This statement, while it followed the general lines of the preliminary message, was designed to draw the attention of the Centaurans to their unfavorable position in respect to the Solar system. Brady said,

"We have come here as the accredited representatives of the Solar system, to offer our friendship and cooperation. We realize from our observations that you have been the unwilling tools of the all-powerful and tyrannical Rihnian Empire, and that is a fault for which we cannot blame you." (The President squirmed mentally). "We realize, too, that a race in your position has no option but to bow to the over-riding force of authority which the Rihnans have produced, and we know that the Centauran aggression against the Solar system was at the command of the Rihnian overlords. We feel that the total destruction of the Centauran fleet was sufficient reprisal for that unwarranted attack." (The President writhed physically and mentally at that painful jab). "We offer the hand of friendship to the Centaurans, and we invite them to join the free and united Empire of the Solar system as equal and cooperative members." (The President sneered cynically to himself). "If this offer is refused and you continue your unfortunate alliance with the Rihnans, then we can only promise you the same fate that will be meted out to them when the day of their final defeat is reached."

Brady sat down abruptly. A brief glance at the President showed how unhappy he and his colleagues were. Brady, himself, felt more than a trifle embarrassed at the pompous message he had delivered. It sounded to him like the demands of that fellow back in the dark ages of Earth's history. What was his name? Hilton! No—Hitlan? Something like that. But the psychologists said it was just the thing for letting the Centaurans know exactly where they stood. He shrugged mentally and waited for the Centaurans to comment on his speech.

It was some time before the President spoke, and then he asked, "How do you know that the Rihnans will not destroy your entire system for what you have done to their Empire?"

Brady answered confidently, "Because they are incapable of it."

"What makes you think they are incapable of it?"

"Have they got a fleet of their own?" countered Brady. "Have they got fighting ships manned by Rihnans only? Of course they haven't. The only fighting they ever do is through the downtrodden subjects of their Empire. They've always left the dirty work to unenlightened stooges like you and your race."

It is certain that the word "stooge" had never been said to the President before, and it is equally doubtful if he would have understood it anyway, but the machine gave him a perfectly literal translation which made him writhe in his chair.

Brady went on: "The only people we have to defeat is you and the Arcturians, and the Denebolans, and the thousand and one other races that compose the empire. Without them the Rihnans are helpless. We shall have the whole Galaxy at our disposal, and at our disposal alone—unless some other friendly races join us in mutual co-operation."

The last phrase was added in a tone of careless afterthought, but the significance of it was not lost on the President; he bit it—hard.

Certainly no one had thought about the real structure of the Rihnan empire for centuries, so used were its members to the Rihnan superiority. The idea planted by Brady was something new, something which took root and grew with amazing rapidity. It aroused something that had not been known in the Empire before—it aroused resentment.

The President said, "If we join the Solar empire, will it protect us against retaliatory measures by the Rihnans?"

Brady drew a deep breath. "You need not fear the Rihnans if you join us; we will protect you from anything they try to do."

The President nodded; he was more than a little unhappy about his evident lack of bargaining power. He had hoped that they would be able to reach some less uncompromising terms, but the way in which the Earthmen had brought the matter to a head so quickly had left him with no excuse at all for prolonging the discussions. He realized that he and the Council had been rapidly and hopelessly outmaneuvered.

"Before giving our answer we would like to ask a few more questions," he said at last.

Brady agreed.

"Why did you only send one ship against us?"

"One ship was all that was necessary. We had to be sure that we would be allowed to land unmolested, so we used one of your own captured craft. Once landed we could begin our efforts to contact you. Had we used one of our ships it would not have got within your frontiers before warning of its coming had gone right through the Galaxy. The Rihnans would have taken fright and we would have had the whole Galaxy about our ears before we had even got

started. We wanted to avoid trouble. There was no sense in launching a full scale war before it was necessary."

"And now you have contacted us you are hoping to get into communication with other systems in the same way?"

Brady shook his head, "With you as our allies and with our fleet in possession of this part of the Galaxy we have other plans," he replied.

"And they are?" inquired the President naïvely.

"That depends entirely on your answer."

"I have no doubt that such a resourceful race as yours has its plans laid against every eventuality."

Brady nodded and said grimly, "Even to the destruction of this planet if need be."

There were gasps of horror from the Council members, and the President's remaining shreds of composure vanished abruptly. He said hurriedly, "Of course we shall give the matter our deep consideration."

"That is not enough," snapped Brady. "At any moment news of what has happened may spread through the Galaxy, and if the Rihnans try to counteract our first successes you will be the first to suffer. Once you grant the main Earth fleet permission to enter your system we will guarantee your protection but we shall not protect you unless you sign the articles which are already prepared for your complete agreement. I must warn you also that we shall probably be forced to use this system as a battleground for our first clash with the Rihnans. And you know what that will mean."

"And if we choose to stand by our friends, the Rihnans?"

"Then you will be treated as enemies, and the first act of our fleet will be to destroy this planet so that it cannot be used by the Rihnans as a base of operations against us."

The President knew when he was beaten, and he glanced along the curved row of his colleagues, each of whom looked as unhappy as he felt, each of whom was leaving the final

decision to him. He realized with an utter loneliness that they wanted no responsibility for such a decision, but whatever he agreed to they would accept with relief as an accomplished fact.

"Naturally we agree," he said.

VI

THE SIGNING of the articles did not take long with the aid of the Translator, and as soon as it was finished Brady said, "I will make immediate arrangements for the protection of this part of the Solar Empire, and if you will issue the necessary orders allowing the passage of our fleet through your system, we will deal with everything else. You may use a closed wave transmitter for issuing orders, and we will provide an inspector to make sure that nothing gets through to the Rihnans."

The President nodded; he could do nothing but agree. "It will be arranged," he answered. "May we know when we shall receive supplies of your weapons?"

Brady eyed him curiously. "It is not intended that the Solar Empire shall commit the same errors as the Rihnans," he retorted stiffly. "We intend to rule; we know the limitations of the races within the Galaxy, but what is more important, we also know that the Rihnans have no such limitations. We shall not give weapons to potential traitors."

"But as your allies—"

"You will have no chance to hand over any of our secrets to the Rihnans," snapped Brady.

The President made a pitiful gesture of appeal. "But we are your comrades in arms, your brothers—"

"There are certain biological and physiological differences

which deny that," returned Brady ironically. "As far as we know we are the only race in the Galaxy with our own peculiarities, but of course you are aware of that."

"That is so," sighed the President. "Your weapons are mightier than theirs."

Brady grinned to himself but said nothing. Even then, he did not intend to reveal to them that Terran weapons were only advanced improvements of captured Rihnian weapons. He motioned his companions to dismantle the Translator, and the President was not able to frame any further questions, though he knew well that any questions he might think of would not alter their unhappy position one iota.

The Earthmen took their leave as suddenly as they had come.

The deployment of the Terran fleet through the Centauran system was completed within four days, Earth time. Along the main Centauran frontier a guard of small cruisers and hastily erected robot detection units had been established, for it was felt within the Terran command that whatever counterattack was launched would come from that direction.

The news of the Centauran defection must have reached the neighboring parts of the Galaxy, and therefore the Rihnnans, within a matter of days—certainly by the time the Earth fleet was disposed through the Centauran system—but the expected counterattacks did not come. On the main frontier everything was quiet, too quiet in fact, for not even a scouting vessel was detected by the anxious watchers. The days grew into a week and the week grew into two, and then into three.

The Admiral in command of the joint Earth fleets held several conferences on the situation, each as inconclusive as the last. The psychologists were, for once, completely baffled. Every day that the Rihnnans waited, the Terran position grew stronger as more and more reinforcements

arrived from the Solar system. All the evidence showed that, even if they did no fighting themselves, the Rihnans had at least an elementary idea of the importance of time, and time was certainly the one thing the Terran fleets needed and which the Rihnans could ill afford to spare.

During this time, Brady questioned the Centauran President and his associates closely on the reasons why there was no acknowledgment, either hostile or conciliatory, from their erstwhile masters. From all of them he got the same reply: they didn't know and could make no guesses. Since their surrender they had been almost pathetically eager to help the Earthmen. The size and strength of the Terran fleets had plainly surprised them, for they were smaller than their own ill-fated armada, but obviously much more powerful. They were anxious to consolidate themselves as the first allies of the new regime.

So far as the Centaurans went, however, they were as puzzled as Brady, and they took no trouble to hide it. At first they had been worried about possible reprisals, but later that fear had given way to relief when they saw that the Earth fleets were going to afford them some measure of protection. Now, almost a month had gone by, and relief had given way to puzzlement and even panic. They were sure that the reason for the Rihnans' silence was that they had heard of the inadequacy of their weapons, and were hurriedly developing some new and more violent means of destruction, against which the Earthmen might be powerless.

Finally, Brady suggested to Admiral Sherman that they might use a small scout vessel to try and find out what was going on.

"We can use a converted Centauran cruiser with an Earth crew, but carrying a few Centaurans as camouflage," he mused. "After all, sir, we can't lose much. At the most

it'll mean a handful of men and we may pick up some useful information about what's going on."

Sherman nodded his agreement. "There might be something in it," he replied. "At any rate, as you say, it can't do any harm, and at least we'll be doing something concrete instead of just waiting for something to happen." He eyed Brady questioningly. "I think I'd like you to command the ship, Brady; what about it?"

Brady smiled with obvious pleasure. "Is that an order, sir?"

Sherman nodded and smiled. "I'll let you make what arrangements you think fit, but don't take any unnecessary risks. For safty's sake, don't be gone more than a week. If you're not back by then we'll know something is wrong, and we can go in and try to break it up before it goes too far."

"Shall I rig up any of our equipment on the vessel, sir?"

"Not on your life," snapped Sherman. "The Rihnans would just love to get their hands on some of those gadgets, and I'm not giving them the ghost of a chance. If you get into any trouble you'll just have to run for it or find your own way out with what you have. I can't take any chances like that."

"Aye, aye, sir." Brady stood up. "Anything else, sir?"

Sherman shook his head. "No, I'll have the orders ready for you in the morning. I take it you can have the ship ready by then?"

"Quite easily since there'll be no conversion. All we need to do is get a crew aboard. May I have Murphy as my number two, sir?"

"I hate to think what you two would do without each other," laughed Sherman. "Yes, I'll include it in the orders, Captain."

Brady's ship was a small, Centauran, interstellar scout.

It carried a crew of fifty-seven plus a dozen uneasy Centaurans as guides and camouflage. With official coldness, Brady told the Centaurans that their families would be held responsible for their good behavior on the trip, and that if the ship failed to return, whether it was their fault or not, their families would suffer. It was a cruel thing to do, but it was the only way of insuring at least some measure of protection against a potential stab in the back.

For three days, the tiny ship made its way along the fringes of the Centauran system, probing here and there into Rihnan territory but taking care not to approach too close to any planetary system. Brady, acting on his orders, tried to find the main stellar shipping routes between the various systems, in the hope that they might intercept a stray trading ship or an inter-system passenger cruiser.

Brady had to work on the assumption that the Rihnans and their allies had heard at least some details of the Terran *coup*, and because of that it was reasonable to assume that the Rihnans would keep the part of the Galaxy adjacent to the Centauran system clear of shipping. As their trip progressed, such appeared to be the case. He was forced to enter deeper into enemy territory than he would have wished, so, for safety's sake, he tried to avoid stellar concentrations that would obviously be more dangerous to their mission. If they encountered the type of ship they were looking for, it would be better if they could do so in some comparatively unfrequented corner of the Galaxy. Then, if their identity was accidentally revealed, they would have a better chance of slipping back within the safety of the Terran defenses before other ships were summoned to deal with them.

On the fourth day, Brady found himself two full days flight from the Centauran system, and much deeper into Rihnan territory than he liked. Accordingly, he turned his ship back toward Ortan with the intention of straightening

his course as he neared his objective. In this way he hoped to use the fifth, sixth and part of the seventh day in searching areas around and to the side of his recent path, while at the same time getting nearer to Ortan. During the third watch Brady lay in his bunk, not sleeping, his thoughts too muddled to allow his mind to rest. He was troubled at the lack of success he had had up to now, for although he had carried out his orders to the letter, and even gone a trifle beyond them in order to achieve his aim, he knew that failure to bring some news would be frowned upon from higher quarters.

The buzz of the alarm had to struggle through his mental turmoil to make itself heard, and even as he grabbed his jerkin with automatic speed he wondered if he actually had heard its low-pitched thrum. It was repeated two seconds later, and before it had finished he was out of his cabin and half way to the control room.

Murphy was on watch. He turned quickly as Brady entered, and pointed wordlessly to the white screen of the subspace detector. A red spot flickered dead in the center of it, a spot which would not be there unless another ship was within detector range.

"How far?" snapped Brady.

"Five million, almost dead ahead and on the same course. It's traveling slower than we are though, so we should be up with it before long," replied Murphy.

Brady licked his lips which were dry with anticipation.

"Have you signaled them yet?" he asked.

Murphy nodded. "Yes, I got the Centaurans to send out the standard heave-to signal. They say we shall be able to parley with them all right."

"I hope so. Make ready the boarding party as soon as we switch out of subspace. I don't want them sending a party over to us if I can help it."

"Hadn't we better send one of our men over to keep an eye on them, sir?" asked Murphy.

"Yes, I'm going myself," replied Brady with a malicious grin, which broadened as he saw Murphy's disappointment. "I'm going to take a portable transmitter strapped to my wrist so that I can broadcast all that goes on. I want you to arrange for a translator to pick up the broadcast and have a wire recorder running to pick up the translation. All right?"

Murphy nodded. "Don't you think it would be wiser to send someone else, sir?" he asked hopefully.

"You, for instance?"

"Well—"

Brady shook his head. "No, this is one job I'm going to do—besides, I want to have a look over that ship myself."

Murphy pursed his lips resignedly. "I'll get things moving if you'll take over here, sir."

"Carry on," replied Brady, turning his attention to the screen where the red dot was growing larger.

The Communications officer came in a minute later and reported that the "heave-to" signal sent by the Centaurans had been acknowledged and that the other ship was eager for an exchange of news and a few supplies if possible.

"Supplies?" echoed Brady.

"That's right, sir; apparently it's a regular thing out here in the Galaxy; when two ships of different races meet, they stop and exchange things. That's what the Centaurans told me, anyway. Often a ship has something common aboard which is very expensive to the other and vice versa, so they do a trade and everyone is happy. I've taken the liberty of telling them to get a few things together, sir," ended the Communications officer, half apologetically.

"Well, when in Rome," sighed Brady. "All right, but see they don't take too much, and make sure there is nothing of Terran origin included."

Ten minutes later, the two ships flickered out of stellar

drive simultaneously, and found themselves within a mile of one another, drifting at parallel speed and course. Brady ordered the boarding party to assemble at the smaller life-tender which his craft carried, and leaving Murphy in the control room with last minute orders not to do anything foolish, he joined them.

The life-tender slipped easily from its resting place in the larger ship and, with its five passengers, cruised slowly across the intervening space to the other ship.

Murphy shook his head regretfully as the life-craft pulled away from the scout. He could see the tiny ship moving slowly across the scant mile of space to the alien cruiser and, as he watched its progress from the control room, he did not feel very happy. Quite apart from his own personal wish to lead the boarding party, he felt that it was bad policy on Brady's part to undertake the risks involved personally—such risks were usually delegated to the second-in-command or one of the junior officers.

He left the control room and made his way down to the radio office where the translator was set up ready for the transmission that was due.

"Life-tender's alongside," he said to the operator. "Transmission should be coming through any minute."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the loud-speaker beside the translator emitted a preliminary faint buzzing.

"Just been switched on," remarked the operator.

"Switch on the wire recorder," ordered Murphy, and seated himself on the plastic couch along one wall of the cabin.

He was not very optimistic of the outcome of the venture, for he realized that they had been lucky to intercept a ship at all. He listened disinterestedly to the preliminary greetings, and was only faintly aroused when he learned that the ship

was a Lyran freighter carrying a miscellaneous cargo, and that it had recently left a planet in the Antares system and was bound for another in the Scorpio region.

He yawned over the technical exchanges between the four Centaurans and Lyran crew and ground his teeth in frustration as they exchanged gifts. Of Brady he heard nothing—not that he really expected to, for he knew the Captain would not take the chance of even a momentary broadcast to reassure him. The minutes dragged out to half an hour while the tension within him rose to the boiling point, and the mounting pile of cigarette butts in the ashtray beside him testified to his state of mind.

The talk switched suddenly to important things as one of the Lyrans said, "We have heard there has been some trouble on the other side of the Centauran system. What is going on?"

The voice of one of the Centaurans came metallically from the translator as he replied, "Some minor race is trying to set up its own empire, we've been told, but we have not been to Ortan for several months, so we have no details."

"One of these days we shall have trouble with one of the outsiders," said another Lyran. "We shall take restrictive action too late and find that the threat is much greater than we supposed."

"Nonsense," put in another, "what can one tiny system do against the might of the Empire?"

"That's right," added another. "Just look at this star map. All the unexplored areas are well on the outskirts of the Galaxy. Why, none of them could do enough damage to be worth worrying about without first infiltrating through the outer reaches. If any of them did try it they wouldn't get very far before the news got to Tekron and when that happened—"

For a moment Murphy thought that the break was because the speaker had finished his piece, but then he realized

with a shock that transmission had been broken off. He swore as he pulled himself up from the couch and crossed to the operator who was feverishly checking his instruments.

"What the hell's gone wrong?" he snapped.

The man shook his head. "Nothing wrong this end, sir. The transmitter has closed down or broken down; there's not even a carrier wave coming through."

The intercom buzzed suddenly, and a voice hysterical in its loudness, called, "Commander Murphy, control here. That ship's gone, sir. It's disappeared!"

VII

MURPHY's face went white as he leapt to the wireless cabin port. Where before there had floated, serenely against the star-strewn background, the silver pencil of the alien ship, there was now—nothing.

The worried face of the third officer, Barton, met him as he lunged through the door.

"It just vanished, sir," he stammered, his voice shaky with disbelief.

"Nonsense! What does the search screen show?" rasped Murphy.

"Nothing, sir," retorted the operator, his face white as he turned toward Murphy. "There's no trace within any range—it just went. One minute it was there; I could see it clearly through the starboard viewpoint and then, well—it wasn't there any more," he ended lamely.

Murphy swung on the screen operator. "What about you? Did your equipment go haywire?"

"No, sir," the man denied. "As the lieutenant said, one

minute it was there, as a red dot on the screen, and the next it was gone, just like that."

Murphy snarled his disbelief in their faces, and stepped to the main control board. He switched power to the forward drive and sent the scout cruising slowly in the direction of the spot where the alien ship had last been seen. He cruised over and through and around it, checking the instruments time and again as he did so, but there was nothing to be found. The ship had just disappeared as though it had never been.

It was three hours before he could bring himself to admit defeat and order the ship to head back to Ortan.

His ship came in through the guard lines precisely seven days after it had gone out through them, but Murphy found no pleasure in the fact that at last he was in command of a ship. His orders and reactions were completely automatic as he brought the ship down to land on Meron spaceport, and made his way heavy-hearted to report the disaster to Admiral Sherman.

Sherman sat quiet. He had not moved or spoken throughout Murphy's report, and the longer his silence lasted the more uncomfortable Murphy became.

He shifted in his chair in an effort to relieve the tension, and the crackle of the plastic upholstery seemed to reverberate through the sparsely furnished office.

Sherman pursed his lips and drew a deep breath. "I wish, Commander," he sighed, "that you had a reputation for alcoholic indulgence."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Sherman smiled wryly. "If you had, I could pass this whole story off as a touch of D.T.'s. As it is—" he shrugged helplessly. "I find myself in the position of not knowing where to maneuver in an impossibly fantastic situation. That is a very bad thing for a Space Fleet Admiral."

•

Murphy relaxed in his chair. If Sherman was in that frame of mind, then there would be no recriminations about his conduct in the affair. He felt relieved, but it was a momentary sensation only, for the relief vanished when he remembered, still with a sense of shock, that Brady was gone.

Sherman sat silent and thoughtful for several moments more before rising abruptly.

"I'm going to send a full report to the Commander-in-Chief," he announced, "and ask for scientific advice."

"Will that help, sir, even if we get it?" asked Murphy.

"What else can you suggest?" countered the Admiral. "We have nothing to go on except the eyewitness reports of yourself and your crew. That is no use to us, for we have no scientists attached to the Fleet capable of evaluating the evidence. To a scientist your story may suggest a lot, and it is obvious that whatever has happened to Brady and that damned ship is the direct result of some Rihnan gadget or weapon about which we know nothing."

Murphy nodded as Sherman's evaluation sank in. "And if that is correct?"

Sherman nodded. "Exactly. Where there is one secret there may be others even more dangerous." He smiled. "Who knows, we may even attract the brilliant and irascible Professor Hartmann."

"That'll be fun, sir," smiled Murphy. "Captain Brady told me a lot about him. He once spent a week in his Siberian laboratories."

"If he thinks it big enough he'll come," agreed Sherman. "Or at least send one of his chief assistants."

He sat down again at his desk. "That's all for now Commander, I'll get that message off at once. In the meantime you and your crew are restricted to the immediate area of Fleet H.Q. Purely a precaution—we don't want any more mysterious disappearances."

In his spacesuit, Brady was pleased to note that he was indistinguishable from the four Centaurans, and he knew that if he kept in the background during the talks, he should have no difficulty in passing muster. The tight-fitting under-cap he wore beneath his transparent space helmet covered all the features of his head except his face, and save for minor differences in color and bone structure there was little to show that he was anything but Centauran in origin. A member of still another race, looking at the five of them, would probably notice little difference.

The tender bumped alongside the alien ship, and as he rose to follow the others through the airlock, Brady fumbled with the switch of the tiny, watch-like transmitter strapped to his wrist. It operated on an ultra-short wave band, and he did not think there was much possibility of its being picked up by anyone within the alien vessel.

They were greeted by two other beings in the airlock and Brady noted with relief that they were a totally different type from the Centaurans. They were a dark, stocky race, one which had evolved, Brady surmised, beneath a hot sun, under the influence of stronger gravity than that of Earth. Once through the airlock and into the main hull of the ship, he knew he was right, for they were greeted with stronger lighting and a considerable rise in temperature.

The ship was constructed on much the same lines as those of the Centaurans, and despite the minor variations in light and heat, Brady saw in it the influence of Rihnan technology. Even the control room to which they were taken was laid out in the same manner as the one he had just left. True, it was larger, for the ship was of a bigger class than his small scout, but he knew that there would be few secrets for him to pry into while he was aboard. He sat down in a seat which was offered him, and tried to follow the talk going on between his four companions and three members of the crew, one of whom was obviously a senior

officer. From the deference with which he was treated, Brady surmised he was the Captain.

The talk continued for nearly half an hour and then there was an exchange of presents amidst much good humor and hard bargaining, and they began to talk again.

Brady resigned himself to another long session, with the inward prayer that Murphy was getting it all on the recorder. He wondered idly if there was anything of importance in all that was being said, and his hopes were raised considerably when they all consulted a star map and one of the aliens made a long and detailed statement to which the Centaurans listened seriously and attentively.

Through the port Brady could see the slim, glinting pencil of the scout outlined against the star-scattered blackness of space. The tight knot of strain which he had carried in his stomach ever since they left Ortan was now gone and, whatever else might happen, at least they would have something to show for their trouble. Sherman would not be able to say they hadn't tried, and for all he knew Murphy might be recording some information of inestimable value to the Terran forces.

His eyes turned again to the port, and his stomach turned over sickeningly inside him. The scout ship was not there, the stars were not there; where a second earlier had been the blazing light of the Galaxy in all its glory was now—nothing. Nothing but pitch blackness. His brain reeled under the shock and he sat frozen in his seat, not daring to move, while his mind tried wildly to grasp what had happened.

He realized through a haze of bewilderment that conversation around him had ceased, and instead there was utter silence. He turned his head slowly, and saw his four companions sitting stiffly where they had been before. One look at their faces told him that something had gone wrong and they had been discovered. The three aliens had drawn back

to the door and were blocking the entrance and watching them warily.

As he looked at them, the door behind them opened and at the sound they stood aside to admit a being.

He heard a sudden startled mutter from the four Centaurans, a mutter which died as rapidly as it had begun, and the being stepped into the brightly lit control room. He was tall, at least seven feet, Brady guessed, and he moved with a peculiar flowing grace which no Earthman of that height could have achieved. His head was the most outstanding feature of his appearance, for it was large, round and completely hairless, yet by no means freakish in appearance. Brady reflected that he would have looked freakish if he had been anything *but* tall, large-headed and bald. The face was large-eyed and wide-mouthed, the huge domed forehead disappearing into a rounded cranium with flat oval appendages on either side.

The being eyed them all in turn, and then spoke in a high, mellow voice, in a tongue Brady recognized as Centauran. As he spoke the words that Brady could not understand there flashed in his brain tingling and alien in its impact, the thought, "One of you is an Earthman."

Brady's stomach twisted again and his brain suddenly felt numb. The four Centaurans were standing stiffly where they were, obviously unwilling to say or do anything, but the very direction of their looks was proof enough for the being as his large eyes roved over the five of them and finally came to rest on Brady. Brady returned the gaze with as much confidence as he could muster, his brain still spinning under the series of jolts it had received in a space of less than two minutes, but it held on to one salient fact—he had been discovered and now he must try and bluff. How and with what he didn't know for something at the back of his mind told him that this was a Rihnan and bluff would be useless.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, he felt that alien tingle and the thought sprang within him, "Yes, I am a Rihnan, obviously the first you have met." The being said something in a strange tongue to the three crew members, and then addressed the Centaurans. All of them moved slowly out of the room and left Brady alone with his alien host.

The Rihnan crossed and sat down on another seat, adjusting it to the needs of his tall, slender form. Brady sat where he was, taut and wary. Now that the climax was past, his brain was ice cool again, his thoughts crystal clear, his whole being tensed, ready to seize any chance of action that might come. He thought suddenly of the transmitter still strapped to his wrist, and without a tremor or the slightest alteration in his manner, he said quietly and quickly, "Get out fast, Murphy, this is a trap. Get going now, that's an order."

A small alien chuckle sounded at the back of his mind, and he saw the Rihnan's lips twist in a manner which suggested humor.

"Your friends cannot hear you, Earthman; neither can they see this ship."

Brady let his breath out in a long sigh. He said, "That's quite a trick you pulled. Mind telling me how it's done?"

In his mind sprang the reply, "Your spoken word has no meaning for me, Earthman; I can only understand what is written in your mind. As to the manner of our disappearance, as soon as I realized that this meeting was a trap on your part to gain information, I sprang our own snare, but until I picked up your thought stream I did not realize we had such a distinguished visitor on board."

Brady bowed ironically. "In other words this ship was also a trap."

"I imagine our mission was the same as yours, to try and find out what was happening within the Centauran system."

We were on our return trip, when we detected your craft. I think you were on a similar mission, but we were the lucky ones. I fear your companions will return empty-handed."

Brady sat quite still. Obviously the Rihnan had no idea that all the conversation between the aliens and the Centaurans had been transmitted back to Murphy and there translated.

"Perhaps not quite empty-handed then," came the tingling thought-stream. "But I doubt whether they will learn much from their recordings."

Brady cursed to himself. The fact was only just beginning to sink in that among their other accomplishments the Rihnans numbered thought-reading. He wondered desperately how he would be able to combat such a terrific advantage. A sudden thought struck him.

"If you can talk to me through my mind why did you not talk to them in the same way?" He indicated the door through which the others had left.

"It was quiet a surprise when I detected unfamiliar thought-streams inside the ship," came the reply. "We had always assumed that we, the Rihnan race, were the only people who had the right type of mind for such development. We cannot talk to them because they have not the same type of mind that your race and mine possess. There is something lacking within them, something very valuable without which no race can develop as we have developed. They are as inferior to you as you are inferior to me, and yet you are more nearly my equal than ever they will be, for they are incapable of developing further without the Rihnans to help them."

"You mean you can conquer them, enslave them, treat them as you wish, but you can't do that with us, is that it?" asked Brady.

"Let's say we haven't done it yet," came the half humorous response. "I agree that you are far superior to them,

but you have a long way to go before you even begin to approach our standard of civilization. I fear you will not survive to complete the long journey."

Brady ignored the threat, and asked, "How did you manage that trick of making the stars and my ship disappear?"

The alien chuckle sounded again in his mind. "If you reverse that question you will be nearer the truth. To your people on that ship it would appear that we are the ones who disappeared. They would see us one minute, both on their detector screens and with their own eyes, and the next we would be gone. They might search for a long time but they would never find us."

"Quite a trick—how do you do it?"

"Technically, I doubt if you would begin to understand, Earthman, but briefly, by means of an extra powerful force-field, we can take the ship and everything inside it completely out of normal space. As long as the field is on, we are, to all intents and purposes, invisible, but such is the power required to maintain the field that we are forced to remain in this one spot; we have not enough power to drive the engines as well. It is a problem our scientists are working on. We shall stay where we are for a little time, and when your ship has departed, we shall revert to normal space and continue back to base."

"That is one trick you never showed the Centaurans," remarked Brady.

The alien laughter echoed in his brain as the Rihnan said, "On the contrary, every ship which the Centaurans have is fitted with the device, but they don't know it is there. No ship can use it unless there is a Rihnan aboard, for it is something not normally needed. You should be flattered that you are important enough for it to be used on your account. I do not think it has been used for many hundreds of years."

Brady took in the information and, as he did so, the obvious question rose in his mind—how did the Terran scientists miss a thing like this when they were taking the Centauran ship apart? They had broken down everything else, why not that if it was there?

To these thoughts there was no answer, and the Rihnan rose from his seat, moving towards the door.

"If you will follow me I will show you to a cabin where you will be comfortable until we reach base."

Brady rose without reply and followed the tall figure out of the control room. He realized with heavy heart that there was nothing he could do at present; the trap he and Murphy had hoped to spring had misfired. True, Murphy might have got some information, but as the Rihnan said, it was doubtful if it would be of any use, whereas the Rihnans had something very concrete to show for their efforts—himself. Under the circumstances he had no illusions about what he could tell them—they could suck him as dry as an orange skin and then cast him aside in the same way.

He followed the Rihnan along the brightly lit metal corridor, past groups of dark, staring aliens, who looked at him with something approaching awe as he followed the tall, graceful figure.

They halted outside a metal door and the Rihnan pushed it open, motioning him inside. The thought came to him, "You will be comfortable here, I will have food and drink sent in to you; I do not know how long we shall be here, but you will be able to see the stars again as soon as we revert to normal space. If there is anything you want, just think of it and if it is possible I will have it sent to you."

Brady stepped inside the door closed behind him. He was in a cabin much like the one he had had on the scout ship. Drained and exhausted by the incredible turn of events, he promptly went to sleep.

VIII

BRADY AWOKE from an uneasy, dream-disturbed sleep in a muddled haze reminiscent of a hangover. For a minute he blinked dazedly at the grey deckhead above him, his tongue moving uncertainly in the nauseous fur that coated the whole of his mouth.

In the instant before he remembered, he wondered who was on watch, and then remembrance of his plight brought sick despair to the pit of his empty stomach. Outside the cabin port, as he turned his head, the brilliant stars glittered in dazzling array across his line of vision, and he realized that while he had slept the ship had left the shelter of invisibility and was resuming its homeward journey.

Before he could speculate further, the handle of the cabin door rattled briefly and the tall figure of the Rihnan he had seen earlier came in.

Brady stood up, uncertain what to do or say, but his mind was made up for him as the thought echoed in his brain, "Your thoughts told me that you were awake, Earthman, and that your appetites need to be satisfied."

Brady nodded. "Yes, I think a meal is called for."

The Rihnan gestured briefly. "As I mentioned before, your spoken word has no meaning for me—you need only think and I shall be able to understand you."

Brady swore silently under his breath, but an alien hint of humor at the back of his mind pulled him up short. He thought, "It takes some getting used to."

"You will learn in time."

"How long before we get to where we're going?"

The Rihnan paused before replying. "About fifteen of

your days. I hope you will not find the trip boring. There are few amusements or occupations on this vessel that would interest you, so I shall not suggest you try them."

Brady smiled as he thought, "Eating is all I'm interested in at the moment."

"Your food will be sent." The Rihnan turned and went out of the cabin.

The Rihnan's estimate of the length of the trip was not far off, for Brady slept fourteen times before the motion of the stars and constellations through his cabin port began to tell him that the ship was slowing down to planetary speed.

Until that moment he had felt only anger and frustration at his capture, but the imminence of journey's end awakened him to the grave peril of his situation. He had no illusions about his power to resist the Rihnans' mind-probing techniques. He realized that he knew too much, and that his worst enemies were his own thoughts. Against them he waged a constant battle to repress any information that might be important to his captors, for he knew that he was probably under constant surveillance.

The strain was not too bad, even during the long hours of wakefulness when he had nothing to occupy his mind. He composed poetry and sang all the songs he could remember; then he recited to himself the story of every movie he had ever seen, recalling his favorites nostalgically. Not only did this pastime help to hide more dangerous thoughts, but it helped to pass the long hours of his imprisonment that would otherwise have become irksome.

Despite all this, he knew he was merely postponing the day when he would be faced with a battery of Rihnans, each trying to pluck from him all the information locked in his brain. It was only a question of time; yet he would have to fight as long as he had anything to fight with. If there was nothing else he could do for humanity, he could at

least try and give it time, be it seconds, minutes, hours or days, for even minutes might be valuable in the battles he was sure would come.

The planet for which they were headed swung round a bluer and bigger star than Sol, and the daylight side, as they moved into it, had a dull bluish-violet aura quite unlike the yellowness of Earth.

As he stepped from the ship behind his Rihnan guard Brady noted that the slight increase in gravity he had first sensed on the ship was noticeable also on the planet. It was not enough for discomfort but it was sufficient to slow him down if ever he got a chance to make a run for it. He smiled cynically as the thought passed his mind—even his innermost imaginings were open secrets to the tall, bald masters of the Galaxy, but the Rihnan gave no sign that he was aware of Brady's intention to escape if he could. The bluish light worried him a little: it had an alien quality about it that was slightly depressing and he shivered a little under the influence of its peculiar balefulness.

From the ship he was led across the broad, metallic expanse of the spacefield toward a large, four-wheeled vehicle standing in front of one of the large buildings that lined the perimeter of the field. There were two more Rihnans waiting for them, and all four of them got in, he and his guard in back and the other two in front.

The car stopped at last, but all he saw was a large courtyard surrounded by high, bluish buildings before he was escorted into a similar edifice. He passed through wide, high corridors and up uncounted stories by elevator. He saw many Rihnans and brief snatches of mental greeting between them and his guards passed across Brady's mind. The experience was one to which he had not yet accustomed himself and the tingling of alien thoughts was a physically uncomfortable sensation. His body felt almost unclean, as if

it were in the possession of another being with himself on the outside looking in.

They finally halted before a door which opened to reveal a large, luxurious, but strangely furnished room. The furniture and fittings were not designed for human physiologies and their bizarreness gave Brady a sharp reminder that this was a race as different from his own as his was from the aboriginies in the jungles of Venus.

There was a Rihnan in the room and there were more short greetings before they took him across the room and motioned him through another door. As he went, the tingling thought-stream of his original captor told him, "You will remain here for a while. Anything you want you may have, you have only to think of it and it will be brought to you. We shall return before long."

Then the whole group departed, locking the door behind them.

They returned as he awoke from his first sleep in the strange room. There were three of them as before, but Brady could not tell whether they were the same three that had left him earlier or even if his original guard was among them. He could not yet perceive any of the variations of feature which in the human world distinguish individuals.

He felt the now familiar prickle of alien thoughts as one of them told him, "We felt your awakening; we did not wish to disturb your rest earlier."

Brady did his best to keep his thoughts noncommittal, but he knew there was a tinge of irony in his responding, "Thank you."

"We have been instructed to obtain from you such information as you may possess regarding the strength, disposition and future plans of the forces which have invaded the Centauran system." The thought stream was slumberous

and seemed to invade his mind with hypnotic deadliness. Brady pulled himself together with an effort.

"You know about that?"

"We have known for some time, but like your own race we were hesitant to act until we had more information about our opponents."

Brady kept his mind as blank as he could. From here on he decided, silence, both physical and mental, was a good line to follow. There was a long pause during which he could feel the peculiar, alien prickling invade his mind; there was no coherent thought or image, only a questioning probe, lulling him into obedience. Desperately he recited *The Walrus and the Carpenter* to himself, but he got stuck halfway and went on into a frantic, bawdy ballad that he had learned in Space College.

The probing ended as suddenly as it had begun, and he looked at the three Rihnans warily, his mind still carefully blanketed.

"We did not expect that you would be entirely co-operative, Captain Brady." The use of his name shocked him, for he knew that he had not consciously mentioned it, and there was a mild alien chuckle of laughter in his mind as the shock registered on his inquisitors.

"You see how easy it is for us to extract information? You may resist for a while, but inevitably we shall discover what we wish to know. There are three of us and I do not think you will be able to combat our combined efforts for very long."

At the back of his mind Brady agreed with the Rihnans, but he went on doggedly with his meaningless recitations. There was a moment's peace, as the Rihnan thought-stream ended, and while he was wondering vaguely about the respite he found himself thinking, "They must never know that our weapons—" He stifled the thought with hysterical horror, perspiration springing to his whitened face and

brow. The faintest hint of an alien tingle, fading suddenly, warned him that the thought had been started by one of the Rihnans in the hope that he would unconsciously finish it off. His jaw set grimly and he started through *The Walrus and the Carpenter* again, striving to remember the verses he had forgotten.

Once more he felt the gentle, insidious probing, the alien prickle of external thoughts creeping, prying, seeking the strands of knowledge he fought so hard to withhold. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief and gazed stolidly at the blank wall behind the Rihnans as they sat in a half circle before him. The *Walrus* ran out on him all too quickly and the alphabet, recited forward and backward, did not help a great deal.

He felt a sudden despair. He knew he could not keep up this sort of struggle for very long—the strain would begin to tell soon and once he was mentally exhausted he would have no hope of further resistance. As the despair grew he wondered if it were really worth the effort, for at the most it would mean a few hours before his mental breakdown was complete and the hours would mean little to Sherman and his fleets. Even with. . . . He pulled himself up sharply, an ice-cold wash of fear clearing his brain as he realized that the despair was not his own, that the thoughts were being planted in his mind. He felt a dizzy relief that he had spotted the trap in time, and he smiled wryly as he thought, "Nice try fellows."

The tension relaxed and he saw the three Rihnans look at each other with their large, luminous eyes, but he could not tell from their expressions what the glances were meant to convey and no thoughts came to his mind to tell him what they were thinking.

He took the pause thankfully, letting his mind relax slightly and stretch itself. So he was quite unprepared for the blinding, paralyzing holocaust of thought which hit him

with uncontrolled fury. It came suddenly, brutal in its intensity, striving to beat down by sheer force his mental control, and his determination dissolved in a pounding, merciless flood of questions and answers, images and words, so that he did not know in the turmoil which were his own and which the Rihnans'. He shut his eyes, burying his head in his hands, trying desperately to shut out the devilish cacophony which seemed to tear his soul to shreds of white-hot pain.

He thought black, striving to subjugate every flicker of thought in his mind to the ultimate negativeness of color; he flooded every corner of his brain with the consciousness black of space, his eyes screwed tight in their sockets under the intensity of his efforts. The probing lances hesitated and he was half conscious of a partial withdrawal as the ferocity of his own effort hit them, but the victory was short lived, for the probing came screaming again through his mind so that his throat contracted and his lips opened in a cry of soundless terror. His brain was being torn asunder, and the black barrier he strove to maintain crumbled under the weight of the sustained assault. Something snapped within his mind as the self-imposed darkness reeled back, and his tortured brain let it go in the dim realization that it could no longer hold on. He let it go and grabbed hysterically at the first primeval thoughts that came to him; an insane riot of color, uncivilized and horrible, took possession of his mind, a gyrating kaleidoscope which hit back at the torturing probes with maddened, uncivilized violence, while his body shook and his muscles tensed under the strain of the struggle.

As suddenly as it had begun the assault ended. The alien attack collapsed, receded and was gone, and Brady's tortured mind subsided into a semi-conscious stupor, through which an odd series of thuds had to force themselves to register on his brain.

White and shaken, he sat for several long minutes, the

tension slipping from him, leaving him sick and weak with reaction. His head ached as it had never ached in his life before and the top of his skull felt as if it would blow off any moment. Even so, the thuds he had heard raised vague curiosity within him, and he opened his eyes painfully in an effort to find out what had caused them.

On the floor in front of him, whence they had fallen from their seats, lay the bodies of the three Rihnnans, all of them unconscious. He did not have time to puzzle on this strange occurrence before the accumulated strain of the last few minutes overcame him and he slid back, himself unconscious, on the bunk.

IX

ADMIRAL SHERMAN'S urgent request for scientific aid was acknowledged personally by President Bannerman. The news of Brady's fate had upset the President greatly, for he had a personal regard for the spaceman, as well as valuing his ability.

Professor Hartmann, for whose services Sherman had particularly asked, was not available. His research work was, at the moment, far too important for him to be spared, and he complained bitterly when the President suggested that his assistant, Ben Wilson, should go instead. Bannerman had been adamant. Hartmann, he agreed, could not be spared but Wilson could, and he issued the necessary orders in spite of Hartmann's protests.

Wilson, together with two assistants, landed at Meron precisely two weeks after Murphy's return, and his arrival was greeted none too enthusiastically by Admiral Sherman, who was inclined to regard him as a second-rate substitute

for the real thing. The real thing being, of course, Hartmann.

Wilson's pugilistic frame loomed large in Sherman's office as he shook hands first with the Commander-in-Chief and then with Murphy.

"Sorry to hear about Brady, Admiral," he said. "Too good a man to lose."

Sherman nodded agreement and motioned Wilson to a chair. "Just how good we're beginning to find out. We're hoping you'll do something about getting him back."

Wilson pursed his lips. "Pretty tall order, judging by your reports. I've studied them during the trip from Earth and, frankly, I don't see what I can do. There are no facts to go on except your eyewitness reports and the supposition that this ship had some equipment which caused it to vanish and which we don't know about." He sat quiet for a moment deep in thought, then he turned to Murphy and asked, "In your report, Commander, you stated that there was no evidence of any kind of energy release."

"That's right," replied Murphy. "None of our detectors showed a thing. One minute the ship was there, the next—well, it was as if she'd never existed. There was no sign of anything on the radar screen and nothing in the energy detectors, as there would have been if she'd blasted off. Another funny thing was the attitude of the Centaurans that we had aboard—they seemed scared stiff. They had certainly never seen anything like it before, which leads us to believe that it is something entirely new."

Wilson nodded, his brow furrowed. "No energy release indicates that the ship never blasted off—in which case she never left the spot."

Murphy blinked in bewilderment. "I don't get it."

Wilson grinned and rose from his seat. "Neither do I, but I'll sleep on it." He turned to Sherman. "Say, Admiral, do you think you could get hold of a ship like the one that disappeared as soon as possible?"

"It's already been done, Professor."

"That's right," nodded Murphy. "I spent the best part of ten days scouring the Centauran ship yards, and I've got one that, to all *outward* appearances at any rate, is the double of the one that vanished."

"Fine," Wilson smiled. "We'll start work in the morning."

At first both Sherman and Murphy had assumed that Wilson wanted the vessel merely to inspect it and see what type of craft had disappeared but after the first few hours it became obvious that this was not the case. Murphy was more than a little disturbed when he was told that, "That bug is pulling the guts out of that ship piece by piece." He frowned and answered noncommittally, nevertheless, the more he thought about it the more he worried. What on earth was Wilson playing at? Surely he didn't expect to find anything in that vessel. He was only doing what had already been done in the laboratories back on Earth years ago—he was just wasting time.

He mentioned his thoughts to Sherman and the Admiral agreed.

"I should have thought laboratory work was called for now, not pulling a blessed ship apart. I think we'll go down and take a look round."

They found Wilson sitting on a step in the main power room of the Centauran cruiser. His face and hands were smeared with grease and he was singing a tuneful, but highly disreputable ballad, in a deep, inaccurate bass.

"Hi, Admirall Hi, Murphy," he greeted them. "Come to see how we're making out, huh? Bit early yet, you know."

"Not exactly, Professor," replied Sherman. "Matter of fact we were wondering why you were wasting your time here. After all," he added with a conciliatory smile, "you're not likely to find much."

"You don't think so?" Wilson eyed the pair of them. "Why not?"

"Well, it's obvious," put in Murphy, "whatever it was that the Rihnans used for their disappearance trick is hardly likely to be anything you'll find here. I told you the Centaurans were as surprised as we were."

"You reckon the ship was Rihnan manned?"

"Well, after all—" Murphy flapped one hand in a vague gesture, "—it must have been for them to realize they had an Earthman on board as soon as Brady went among them."

"Then why," asked Wilson, "didn't they realize it immediately?"

There was no answer.

"My view," he went on, "is that there were a few Rihnans on that ship, but apart from that it was what it was supposed to be, a freighter from the Lyran group rigged up to scout just like your ship. We know for a fact that the Rihnans have no ships of their own, but they utilize those of the other races."

Sherman frowned. "So?"

"We know also," continued Wilson, unabashed, "that the vessels of one race must, except for minor details, be very much like those of another race—after all, they are all Rihnan built. I think that this vessel," he tapped the floor with his foot, "is probably a near duplication of the one you encountered out there, and if that is so then it should contain the apparatus which was responsible for the disappearance."

"It could have been installed on the other ship when the Rihnans wanted to use it," pointed out Murphy.

"Could be," agreed Wilson, "but it's unlikely. After all, the Rihnans have known for thousands of years that no race can use any of their weapons unless they have been shown how. They certainly couldn't puzzle out something they don't know is there."

Sherman gestured angrily. "We know all that, but why should it be so?"

"Search me," shrugged Wilson, "but it is. Anyway, as I see it, whatever this gadget is it's probably installed in all vessels of similar type irrespective of race, so all I have to do is find it. And now, if you'll excuse me—" he grinned gently at them.

"Yes, yes, of course," Sherman blushed faintly under his tan. "Let me know if you want anything."

"Sure will."

Outside the ship Sherman looked at Murphy with helpless indignation. "Now what?" he asked.

Murphy flushed in turn. "I guess he must know what he's doing, sir."

"I hope so," growled Sherman.

Two days passed slowly, without results, and all that Murphy saw of Ben Wilson was at mealtimes in the officers' mess when the scientist appeared in greasy overalls, usually whistling and always cheerful. The first morning at breakfast Murphy caught his eye and asked him, with gloomy interest, "Any luck yet?" To which Wilson grinningly replied, "No, not yet."

He was at lunch on the third day of Wilson's inspection of the ship, when the scientist came in, whistling as usual, his overalls dirtier than ever. Murphy made up his mind that he could not stand another, "No, not yet," being thrown at him, and he went on with his meal as if the scientist's presence at the counter of the cafeteria had been unnoticed by him.

When he had collected his food Wilson left the counter, and to Murphy's surprise, crossed to the table, and sat down opposite him.

"Hi, Murphy," he said cheerfully.

"Hi, yourself," Murphy replied and went on with his meal,

wondering vaguely why Wilson should suddenly seek his company.

Wilson made no attempt to enlighten him, but rubbed his hands boisterously over his plate as he remarked, "Good grub you fellows get here."

Murphy shrugged disinterestedly. "Could be worse, I guess."

Wilson attacked his meal with a fine show of appetite and, after a few voracious mouthfuls, he waved a fork in Murphy's direction and asked in a conspiratorial whisper, "Noticed anything?"

Murphy blinked in astonishment. "No."

Wilson winked. "I haven't said, 'No, not yet.'"

Murphy stared blankly for a moment before the significance of the statement burst upon him. "You mean you've found something?"

"Uh, huh! I reckon so."

"What is it?"

"Come along to the ship after lunch and I'll show you and the Admiral. I phoned him before lunch."

"But what is it?" insisted Murphy.

"Maybe nothing," replied Wilson unconcernedly. "On the other hand—" he winked again. "Anyway, you come along and see for yourself, say about fourteen hundred." And he refused to say another word about the subject.

They found Wilson in the main control room of the cruiser still whistling and still greasy. He greeted them cheerfully and led them over to a large board which, with its dials and controls, its viewers and screens, was the brain of the vessel. His two assistants were working there steadily and unhurriedly, but they moved aside as the three men approached.

"Know what that is?" asked Wilson.

A flicker of impatience crossed Sherman's face. "Of course, it's the main control board," he answered.

"No, no," said Wilson. "I mean the portion of it that I've marked out with a white chalk line."

Sherman and Murphy both looked at the area he indicated, and it was Murphy who replied, "Why, sure. It's the control point for the ship's protective screens."

"Smart boy," smiled Wilson. "Now then, look a bit closer and tell me if you see anything peculiar about it."

Murphy eyed Wilson uncertainly. They peered closer at the chalk enclosed area, Murphy searching intently. He had seen similar boards a hundred times before on a dozen different vessels; the keys and switches, the dials and screens were all as he would have expected them to be, and everything looked in perfect order. Beside him, Sherman, too, was frowning as his eyes wandered across the board. After a minute or so the Admiral turned away and shook his head. "I'll buy it," he said. "What's so funny?"

"How about you, Murphy?" asked Wilson.

"It's just like any other board I've ever seen."

"Exactly. It is just like any other board or screen control you ever saw in this or any other ship, and, despite the fact that you and a hundred thousand others have seen boards like this on countless occasions before, you have never noticed anything peculiar about it."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, man," snapped Sherman, "get on with it. What is wrong? You seem to know all about it."

Wilson grinned and, moving nearer to the board, pointed to a dial in the center of it. "Just look at that dial," he told them. "Now then—?"

Murphy frowned. "It's the control that shows how much power is being fed into the screen circuits. When it reaches the red mark on the dial it means that the screens are on maximum power. The switch below it is the power control."

"Right," interrupted Wilson. "That red mark is only a

third of the way round the dial. That dial is the only one on the whole board which is so marked. I presume it is the same on all other ships?"

"Of course," replied Sherman.

"Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

Murphy stirred uneasily, but neither he nor Sherman answered.

"What would happen, do you suppose, if the needle could be sent right around the other two thirds of that dial?"

Murphy laughed. "That's easy, you'd blow every power source in the ship, if you could do it; but you can't, the switch doesn't have enough play in it to allow that to happen."

Wilson nodded, "Yes, I'd noticed that. But if you would blow everything in the ship like you say, then why fix such a dial in the first place?"

Sherman, too, was frowning hard. "Yes, indeed," he said, half to himself. "Why not fix a standard dial?"

"Odd, isn't it?" remarked Wilson chattily, and as he spoke he put out one hand and began to turn the switch slowly round. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "we wondered about it too, so we have removed the stop which prevents the switch from being turned too far, and now we shall see what will happen when it is turned all the way around" He did not stop as the needle reached the red mark on the dial, but continued to switch every possible ounce of power into the screen projectors. "Of course," he said mildly, "this could blow the entire ship to kingdom come."

Sherman and Murphy watched him grimly, neither of them daring to speak. The whine of the generators rose in pitch as the needle swung slowly round the dial until, finally, it came to rest against the extreme edge of it. As it did so Wilson dropped his hand from the switch and eyed the dial reflectively. Then he turned and looked out of the forward view port.

"Seems to have got a bit dark outside," he informed them.

Sherman swore and moved to another port with Murphy at his shoulder. As Wilson had said, it was as black as pitch outside the ship, and even the lights from the control room cast no shadows or beams through the stygian depths.

"At a guess," remarked Wilson, "I would say that the ship is now totally invisible from outside."

"I'll be damned," growled Sherman. "So that's how it's done. And under cover of this they could sneak off and we'd never know a thing about it."

"No, I don't think they would," replied Wilson. "As you said just now, to keep this up requires about ninety-five per cent of the ship's available power, and with it on they couldn't move an inch. My guess is that they just stayed where they were for a few hours until you had cleared off and then emerged from their cloak and buzzed off home."

Murphy turned on him, "You mean—if I'd stayed—?"

Wilson nodded soberly, "They would probably have emerged under your very nose."

Murphy swore luridly. Wilson turned away and began to put the switch back to its normal position.

"Hold on," snapped Sherman. "Suppose someone has wandered into the area in which we materialize."

"No fear of that," Wilson assured him. "I had an area marked off around the ship and warned everyone to keep outside no matter what."

He turned the switch faster, and light flooded suddenly outside the port as the ship flickered back into visibility. From the ports Murphy and Sherman watched the bewildered antics of the crowds of Earthmen and Centaurans outside.

Sherman was utterly stunned and chagrined by the demonstration. At last he drew a deep breath and said, "So now we know how it's done, but what good does it do us?"

"Quite a lot, I'd say," returned Wilson. "At the moment a ship using that field is anchored to the spot through lack

of power, but suppose it was able to move about?"

"By God!" Sherman's eyes gleamed. "That would be something."

"How would it see where it was going?" put in Murphy, dubiously.

"One thing at a time," grinned Wilson. Anyway, I'll work on it." He vanished through the door and Sherman turned to Murphy. "Well, that's that, Commander. We nearly made ourselves out to be bigger fools than we really are."

Murphy grinned abstractedly. "Sir, now that it's been taken care of I've been wondering about Captain Brady."

"What about him?" The twinkle faded from the Admiral's eyes as he asked the question.

Murphy shifted uneasily. "He could be pretty important to us either way, here or in the Rihnan's hands. I'm wondering if he might not be important enough for us to try and get him out."

"No personal feelings?"

"A few naturally," admitted Murphy. "But it wouldn't do us any good if they managed to learn too much from him."

"Agreed, but I don't feel justified in risking ships and men on a mission that has a good chance of failing. Besides, we don't know where he is."

"We have a good clue, sir," Murphy told him. "Just before the vessel vanished one of the crew said they were bound for Tekron; it could have been a false steer, but, on the other hand, if they had no suspicions of us at the time it could be true."

Sherman nodded. "But I'd have to let you have a fully armed ship to give you any chance of coming out alive if you do find Brady. If that ship gets captured—"

"If they have already got the information from Brady it won't matter. If not, we can fix the vessel's destruction if it is threatened with capture."

"You've been doing some research, Commander," said Sherman accusingly. "What else have you decided?"

Murphy flushed. "Well, sir, some Centaurans who have been to Tekron have given me a plan of the city showing the spaceport and a large building about a quarter of a mile from it which is the Rihnan Headquarters. If Brady is on the planet he'll be there. We can use a camouflaged merchant cruiser, go in slow so as not to arouse suspicion, and once we've landed. . . ."

X

HOW LONG he remained unconscious Brady did not know, nor did he ever find out. He came to slowly, struggling painfully back to the crest of consciousness. Finally he became aware that there were urgent proddings in his mind, telling him to recover and say what had happened.

He sat up, his eyes blinking painfully at the sudden influx of light, and he saw that there were half a dozen or more Rihnans in the room. Two of them stood in front of him, and he could feel the prickling in his brain as their thought-streams demanded to know what had happened.

Dazedly, he tried to quell the lancing pain in his head by answering the incoming thoughts. "I don't know. I—Lord, my head! I don't know what happened."

He dropped his head in his hands, aware above all else that it ached adominably and that he felt sick.

"It is obvious that he knows nothing."

"But what could have happened?"

"Probably we shall never know. They are in a completely cataleptic state. They may never recover consciousness."

The two minds sounded in Brady's own as if they had spoken aloud. He looked up in alarm, but there were only the Rihnans as they moved about the room and studied the three inert bodies on the floor. Memory flooded back and with it came bewilderment about what had happened. Why could he suddenly hear outside thoughts as easily as if they had been spoken out loud? Now he picked up sudden snatches of other alien thought-streams.

"Impossible—"

"The Earthman has no such latent power—immature race—"

"He was caught like them."

"Yes, only his weak brain saved him from whatever caused it—"

And as the messages poured in and his brain took hold of the situation he was aware of a mental facility that he had never known before, as if a curtain had been drawn aside in a darkened room and sunlight was now pouring in.

For the moment his existence had been forgotten by the Rihnans, and in that short time his brain sought and found an almost impossible explanation for the bewildering events. His mind gagged at the vistas which were opened before him as a result of that frantic five minutes during which he had fought the combined impact of three alien minds. The ferocity of that onslaught had forced him to defend himself with every means available, conscious or unconscious, and he could not even guess at the primeval forces which had liberated some hitherto unused portion of his mind so that it could fight back.

The result of that grim struggle was this wonderful new power, a triumph of the human mind. But, he thought, he must be careful not to be too jubilant. Only by concealing his power from the Rihnans could he use it against them. He would have to be on guard constantly.

Brady used his new powers cautiously in the next few days partly to test them and partly to make sure that time didn't dull them, and he learned that the building he was in constituted the Rihnan headquarters for the planetary system of the star Tekrir. The remainder of the city was inhabited by natives of the planet Tekron, which was the largest of the five inhabited planets in the system.

Despite this new activity Brady found that his confinement began to pall. There were no windows in his room, and he found little recreation in the periodic visits of the Rihnans who examined him and attended to his personal needs. He made an inquiry of one who brought his food as to the prospects of being allowed out for exercise and fresh air.

"Guarded, of course," he added with a smile, but apparently his facial expressions were as meaningless to the Rihnans as were his spoken words. He received a fleeting, disinterested impression that his request would be considered, and then he was alone once more.

Brady dismissed the matter from his mind with some disappointment and resigned himself to a long period of close confinement, so he was genuinely surprised when two Rihnans came soon after his next meal and informed him that he would be allowed to walk at will through the city for an hour or so each day under their "protection."

Brady took more pleasure than he had expected in his first tour among the high, blue buildings beneath the eerie blue sun. The gravity affected him a little and he did not walk as far as he would have done on Earth under similar circumstances.

His interest was in the strangeness of his new surroundings, for the human race had not yet become so used to alien contacts and alien worlds that they ceased to be exciting. The two Rihnans guarding him were not interested, he could read that in their minds, but he found that it was their minds alone, of all the multitudes thronging the

city, with which he could make contact. The stocky, dark-skinned Tekronians who made up the bulk of the population, chattered aloud among themselves, making up a babel that was reminiscent of London or Paris or any other great city, but of their minds and their thoughts he could detect nothing. He remembered the words of the first Rihnan he had ever encountered.

"They have not the same type of mind."

He wondered if that was the reason for the Rihnans' overwhelming superiority in technical and scientific fields, and concluded that it was.

There were other races there, too, and his experience with them was the same. He saw many of them during his outings, all of them humanoid to a great extent, though some had basic differences in their make-up, such as extra limbs or organs. Chiefly, the differences were in size and coloring: some were built on mammoth lines with bulging muscles rippling on thick-set torsos. These were the products of planets with heavier gravity than Tekron's. Still others were tall and willowy, slender and fragile, and they moved with even more difficulty than did Brady.

But of all the many races from all over the Galaxy, none but the Rihnans responded to Brady's mind.

It was on the fourth of his outings that Brady became aware that he and his escorts were being watched. At first it was just one of those mysterious hunches, but he became certain when he realized that he was seeing a great deal more of one particular being than he would have expected under the circumstances.

His escorts noticed nothing unusual, and Brady made certain that he gave them no suspicions on the matter. During the next few periods of liberty, he carefully noted the appearance of the gray-bearded humanoid with large, deep-set

eyes and odd antennae sprouting from his forehead, one over each eye.

He appeared two or three times during each period of exercise, sometimes walking toward them, sometimes passing them from behind, and often just standing at the side of the road apparently admiring the scenery. On no occasion did he give any sign that he noticed the presence of Brady and the two Rihnans escorting him, and the more it happened the more puzzled about it Brady became.

The climax came suddenly and unexpectedly. Brady had spotted the being for the third time during one outing, when he decided to, throw a tentative thought-probe at the stranger as he passed them. For a moment he refused to believe what his senses told him as there lay before him, open to his sudden probing, a mind, alert and unprepared. Just for a moment he touched it, and then it was gone even as he began to explore it, closed against him as if it had never been. The stranger vanished into the crowds and Brady never saw him on Tekron again.

Back in his room he tried to puzzle the whole thing out, but without result, for there was too little to go on. He wondered, with illogical hope, if the being was an Earthman in disguise, and a part of some complicated plot to rescue him. He put the idea aside sternly as he reminded himself that no one knew where he was, and even if they did they would hardly be likely to risk other lives and ships to get him out.

Yet he could not entirely throttle the hope that he would be rescued before long.

A week after Brady's strange encounter his two escorts came, as usual, after his midday meal. He rose in preparation for his exercise period, but instead he was told, "We are to take you before the President of the Rihnans Hierarchy. Your exercise period has been cancelled today."

Brady's surprise was as genuine as it was obvious.

"It appears that you have heard of the President?"

"Yes," agreed Brady carefully, "I learned of him from the Centaurans. I am honored—"

The thought was brushed angrily aside. "The President comes not to honor you but to question you about your race. You will come now."

His escorts wasted no time, and the pace at which they took him to the President had him gasping for breath; evidently the President did not like to be kept waiting. The room where they left him was the largest he had yet seen; it was in the same building. Before wide, high windows through which filtered the light of the blue sun, was a semi-circular table behind which sat seven Rihnans. Their clothes attested to their importance, and none was more important than the one in the center.

Apart from his magnificent dress, he had an aura about him which compelled attention. His magnetic quality gave Brady warning of his power even before his mind reached out and urged Brady to take a seat in front of the table. The other six, though obviously above the class and standard of those he had met so far, were so outshone by the one in their midst that Brady automatically dismissed them from mind.

He sat down, and as he did so the all-too-familiar pricking attacked his mind. During his hurried journey from his prison room he had decided what to do, and he had to admit to himself afterwards that the cover of fear and bewilderment he put out in defense was not entirely assumed. He was more than just apprehensive. He shifted uneasily in his seat and felt a faint prickle of sweat break out on his forehead. His eyes were drawn toward the hypnotic gaze of the President who looked dispassionately and fathomlessly at him. No, his fear was not wholly assumed.

After what seemed an age the probing ended.

"Tell me, Earthman, of what are you afraid?"

Brady licked his lips. "I am far from my home and my people, and in circumstances I do not fully understand."

"There is much that we wish to know about your race," came the thought again.

"But I have already told you all I can." Brady hoped it sounded convincing.

"Nevertheless, we will go through it again."

And then it began, much as it had been before, only there were seven of them and the questions flowed in so fast and fluently that it was as much as he could do to sift those to be answered from those to which he must, at all costs, profess ignorance.

They covered every facet of human existence and ambition: how the people lived and how they had gained superiority over the Centaurans; what were the secrets of their weapons; what was the real extent of their mental capacity and how much did they know about the Rihnan civilization. From every side the questions poured in and answers were demanded so quickly that Brady's bewilderment became real, and after bewilderment came pain as his head began to ache under the pressure, and with the pain went his physical strength. It ate into every corner of his being, dragging him down into a pit of exhaustion so that he had to fight every inch of the way to maintain his deception.

It continued hour after hour, questions repeated so that facts could be verified, "Last time you told us—"

"I am confused—"

"Why did the Centauran weapons fail?"

"I don't know, only our scientists—"

"How large are the Earth fleets?"

"I know of seven or eight hundred first line cruisers—"

"You quoted a thousand before."

The facts and figures whirled in his mind in kaleidoscopic fashion and still he hung on, though by now his brain was

reeling on the threshold of unconsciousness, and if he did black out God only knew what they would wring from him. The light from the windows began to hurt his eyes and his vision went out of focus so suddenly that he almost vomited from the suddenness of the reaction. His brain began to spin under the pounding and he felt his mind reeling on the brink of sanity.

As suddenly as it began, it ended, and his mind was his own once more, there was peace where before there had been torment. He sat slumped in his seat hardly believing they had finished.

Cautiously he probed out with his own mind, seeking gently, and ready to withdraw at the first sign of suspicion.

"We shall learn no more from him. It is clear that he is only a minor officer in the Terran military forces."

"We have learned a great deal," interposed another Rihnan.

"I could have wished that it were more."

"Are you sure—?"

"He was on the brink of losing his mind when we stopped. No being could resist in that state, and I think we have learned enough."

"What shall we do now?"

There was a pause and Brady was aware that the President had turned his great, luminous eyes to look at him again. For a moment he feared that he had been detected, but the fear faded at once when he read only contemplation within the other's mind, contemplation of the problems which Earth's victory had raised for the whole of the Rihnan race.

"It is clear that the Terrans must soon make a move to consolidate their present conquests. I believe they will break out in to the rest of the Galaxy to take more territory and grab more ships and weapons, for the more races they can

conquer the more allies they will have to fight against us.

"Surely no race would turn against us?"

"The Centaurans have done so, not actively I agree, but if the Terrans have much more success, they will do all in their power to make good their position with their new conquerors. The answer is to mobilize our entire fleets and hold them ready in three large groups so that they are on hand when the Terran breakout comes. From their position I would judge that they must move in one of three directions, toward Raygol and the Galactic center, toward Arakos and the Western sectors, or eastwards toward Menator. If we cover those three approaches, whichever direction they strike toward will be covered until the other two fleets can get there."

The names meant nothing to Brady but he realized the importance of the thoughts he had tapped. Simple though the plan was, it would be of inestimable value if Sherman could be given details of it, for he would have something on which to base his strategy instead of jabbing out blindly until he got a reaction. If he could tell Sherman—Brady laughed bitterly to himself—if pigs could fly!

"What about the Terran weapons?" he heard the thought as it was sent to the President from one of the others at the table.

"We have learned something from the Centaurans that were taken with this Earthman," was the response. "Not much, but enough to tell us that the Terrans have adapted our own weapons in ways we never dreamed possible, so that they are quite superior to anything we have."

Brady sensed the consternation that the news aroused in the other Rihnans. It was obvious that they had not been told before.

There was a hint almost of terror as one of them said, "But if that is so, then how can we hope to combat them?"

There was a thin, contemptuous, alien chuckle as the

President responded. "Do not fear, we have technicians already working on the problem. We have one valuable asset which the Terrans do not yet know about: our invisibility field."

"But surely they must know about it?"

"If they did we should never have captured this Earthman. Our technicians have been working on additional power sources so that our ships will be able to move within the field, and they have been successful. With that as an element of surprise, coupled with our superiority in numbers, I am confident that we shall be successful. I agree that our losses may be heavy, but the main thing is to crush this threat before it grows too great to deal with."

"Will sufficient vessels be equipped in time?"

"We shall see that they are."

Brady lifted his head. The pain was ebbing now, and he did not wish to attract attention by looking more ill than his mind admitted. A moment later he wished he hadn't, for the movement drew the attention of the President to him.

The luminous eyes looked at him, and the thought came to him:

"I regret that it was necessary to cause you some discomfort, but you will realize that what you are concerned in is more important than the personal feeling of one being." And that was the only acknowledgment the inferior Earthman received from the Rihnan leader.

XI

OUTWARDLY the ship looked like any other interstellar freighter that could be found on any of the trade routes anywhere in the Galaxy. The external identification proclaimed her

to be outward bound from Canopus with general cargo for the Tekrir system. Beneath her squat, ugly hull lay the engines and weapons of a first-line cruiser, and on her control bridge stood Commander Murphy, his mission—lifesaving.

They were twelve days out from Meron, the fleet headquarters, and the tiny blue spot which was the star Tekrir shone brightly in the center of the view screens. Their speed had been much below the ship's maximum capability, for Murphy had not wished to endanger the mission by causing suspicious comment about the speed of his craft. It was irksome to have to jog across space at half the speed he could do, but it was safer that way, and he was able to nurse his engines for the rapid withdrawal he would have to make if he was successful, or if he was not.

His second officer, Barton, entered the control room.

"Plot gives us twelve hours at our present speed, sir," Barton told him.

"Better prepare the landing party," replied Murphy. "Tell them to get six hours sleep and then we'll hold a briefing session in their mess."

Murphy left the bridge and went below to his cabin. He did not sleep soundly.

Within an hour of his being called he attended the briefing in the Commando's mess room. It was short and to the point, for the plan of campaign was comparatively simple. The spaceport was a quarter of a mile from Rihnan headquarters, and Murphy planned to take control of the spaceport buildings with a mixed party of Commandos and crew members under the command of Lieutenant Barton while he and Major Reynolds took two main parties and converged on the building from different directions. From the information he had received from the Centaurans, Murphy anticipated little opposition at the building itself, but on the way back he expected that the alarm would have been given and at least some forces dispatched to head him off.

The route back to the ship from the Rihnan H.Q. was to be different from either of the approach routes. Once back at the field the two main parties would embark at once on the ship while the third party covered them from the spaceport buildings. The third party would then withdraw and all being well, they would head for home as fast as they could.

An hour later they contacted the planet, Tekron, almost dead ahead and a little below the large globe of the parent star. Another hour and they were sliding slowly down through the atmosphere toward the gleaming lights of the city and its spaceport. It was roughly three o'clock in the morning, local time.

The ship grounded as close to the spacefield buildings as the landing lights would allow and hardly had she settled to rest before the large cargo doors amidships were thrown open and the first party was racing, as hard as the increased gravity would allow it, to take over the control of the field.

From the other side of the vessel Major Reynolds' party set off in the opposite direction to approach the Rihnan headquarters from the rear, drove from the main entrance of the spacefield and out into the streets of the city.

His party moved in two columns, one on each side of the road, and kept as close to the shelter of the buildings as they could. They made little noise in their soft footwear, and only the clink of equipment and the soft rustle of moving bodies disturbed the night's silence. The gravity affected them slightly and before they had gone a hundred yards out of the gates many of them were breathing heavily and struggling to get their second wind.

At Murphy's side a young Commando subaltern swore under his breath and whispered "This damn gravity will cut

our speed when we return, sir. I reckon it'll throw our schedule out at least five minutes."

Murphy grunted in reply. It was true and he wondered with some apprehension if that five minutes might not make all the difference between success and failure.

Their route took them straight to the Rihnan H.Q., and, although it was barely a quarter of a mile in a straight line, the turns in the road stretched it to nearly twice that distance. Nevertheless, it was precisely four minutes after they left the ship that the tall unmistakable bulk rose out of the darkness ahead of them.

They reached the end of the avenue leading directly onto the building and Murphy signaled for the two lines of men to stop until he got word from Reynolds that he was in position to attack. He switched on the tiny receiver-transmitter and waited impatiently for the signal. Reynolds was covering a longer route and it would be at least another minute before he was in position.

Finally, after what seemed a century, the set on Murphy's wrist buzzed briefly and Reynolds' voice, high pitched and distorted by the receiver, reported, "In position at the rear of the building. Go ahead, Commander."

Murphy breathed a thankful sigh and snapped over the switch.

"Make as little noise as possible. There are no signs of alarm as yet. I will take the ten top stories by elevator, you take the bottom twelve and make sure your men search every room. Confirm, please."

"Message acknowledged," came Reynolds voice. "Over."

Murphy bared his teeth slightly as he snapped the switch over and gave the order. "Rendezvous in the main entrance in ten minutes. Attack now. Go!"

They made straight for the great front entrance from which a soft glow of light emanated disclosing the fact that

someone was on guard duty. Murphy grinned as he thought of how surprised that guard was going to be. They broke through the front door in a rush, with Murphy and the subaltern in the lead and, from a large desk before them, half a dozen startled beings looked up at them. The two groups stood dead still for perhaps five seconds, eyeing each other while more of Murphy's men crowded in behind him.

Murphy broke the silence as he ordered, loudly and harshly, "Elevators, men. The top ten floors. Number three squad hold this hall."

They ran for the elevators and, as they did so, the group by the desk unfroze and moved across the hall to intercept them. The commandos took no chances and the six beings died in the lancing blasts of their weapons.

When the elevator reached the top story, the party burst from it like a miniature avalanche. Activity could be heard from below, and the sounds of conflict had already disturbed the occupants of the top story, for as they left the elevator they encountered another small party of the bald-headed beings. That the alarm had been given was quite clear, for one of them immediately opened fire with a small hand weapon and a man at Murphy's side slid to the floor. The Commandos wasted no time, and the flashing bursts of their weapons cleared the corridor very effectively.

Murphy went for the first door he came to. The room was empty, as was the second room and third room and the whole top story and, finally, the whole ten top stories. Murphy and his group headed downstairs to see if the other party had had better luck.

They went uninterrupted to the ground floor and Murphy was, by now, in an agony of suspense to see if Brady was there waiting for him. When they got to the main entrance hall most of the other parties had already gathered and

were waiting for him. His face was taut and strained as he crossed quickly towards Reynolds.

"Any luck, Reynolds?"

Reynolds shook his head, his lips pursed to a thin line.

"Hell and damnation," snarled Murphy. "He must be here somewhere." He glared round the hall like a caged animal.

"We've been through the whole building, sir," Reynolds told him. "I just had a call from Barton and opposition is hotting up round the field. He suggests we withdraw as soon as possible."

Murphy glanced at his watch. It was just fourteen minutes since the ship had landed and his timetable to this point had allowed for fifteen. Clearly there was not time for further searching. He swore again luridly, aware that the rest of the men around him were waiting for a decision, and his mind was made when one of the party on lookout guard in front of the main entrance came in to report. "There's some opposition moving up the main avenue toward us, sir."

Murphy made up his mind fast. "Well, we'll have to leave here, that's all, Reynolds, but we'll grab a couple of prisoners as we go. They may be useful. Make sure its these bald-headed types, though."

From outside there came sounds of firing, indicating that the lookout party were engaging an attacking force of the enemy, and the advance guard left on the double.

Murphy elbowed his way through the crowd of Commandos and crewmen who thronged the hall, with Reynolds at his back, and together they ran down the steps of the building and out into the blackness of night. They swung left along a wide thoroughfare and, ahead of them, dark shadows moving silently against the walls of the buildings, went the advance guard.

"On the double," ordered Murphy quietly, and heard the word going back through the ranks. He moved quickly and

as quietly as he could, but there seemed to be no more reason for silence—the whole city was in an uproar.

There had been no sign of Brady. Murphy was utterly deflated. He had been so sure Brady was here. He had led his men into this desperate situation, many of them already killed, and all for nothing. The mission was a failure.

It was a smaller, chastened party that finally broke through to the spaceport and learned, with relief, that the rear guard had managed to stave off the attacks on the ship, though with heavy losses. They boarded the ship and prepared to take off. They were just in time, for the blasts of the attackers were already breaking around the ship.

Murphy switched power into the engines and heard the whine of the generators. Beneath him the ship stirred and grumbled, the scene before him began to move and fall away, the lights were smaller now and the flashes of weapons not so bright. He took her up and away from the turmoil which he had caused, and out into the star-strewn darkness of the alien night with the heavens opening out before him. In his heart was a deep, sick, void, partly from reaction but mainly because Brady was not with him on the control bridge.

XII

BRADY HAD a lot to think about during the days following his examination by the Rihnan President. He was thankful that he had been able to bluff his way through as he had done, but he was quite worried about the information he had gained after the examination. He could not imagine

the Terran forces resting for long on their laurels, and once they did attempt further conquests it seemed likely that the Rihnan President's appraisal of the situation would be correct.

Then there was the mystery of the being with the peculiar antennae, and the more he thought about him the more he was convinced that he was part of an attempt to rescue him. But the days passed and there was no sign of any such attempt.

Finally Brady decided that he could not wait much longer, for with their resources it would not take the Rihnans very long to fit out their fleets with the devices the President had outlined to his colleagues. He did not know how long it would take him to contact Sherman if he did get off the planet, and that made every extra day he was held captive of increasingly greater importance. If rescue did not come to him, he would have to escape.

The problem of how to do it was something else again. Any plan he decided upon would have to be based on the spacefield, and on the prospects of getting a small ship he would be capable of handling alone. Such a ship was liable to be vulnerable to attack, especially by a full-size cruiser, and he would have to rely on the element of surprise to take him away from the planet before any pursuit was started.

The key lay in his daily walks, and subtly he began to direct his outings toward the field. He did not try to go very near it at first, but each day, following a slightly different route, he edged closer to it.

Then he started working on the next stages of the problem. He noted that from the outside of the spacefield entrance he could get a good view of the field and the ships which were using it. Some were familiar, others quite strange, but nearly all of them had the same fault—they were too large. He had to be careful to see that he did not go past the

spaceport too frequently, and thus give his guards an inkling of his intentions, and because of this factor he could not be sure that he was going to choose a day when a suitable craft would be on the field. Neither could he be too particular about the type of craft he was to steal, and his main fear was that, having taken steps to dispose of his guards, he would find that the ship he had picked was either unready for flight or unsuitable for a one-man crew. He had already decided how to put his guards out of action or, at least, what to try.

On his fourth stroll past the field he spotted a small planetary craft lying half hidden behind the bulk of a larger vessel. He was familiar with the type of ship, and knew that its power sources gave it a large stellar range, but it was the other supplies which gave him most cause for doubt. Probably it had oxygen for six or seven days, but food and water would be limited to bare emergency supplies; that was the risk he had to take.

He reached out gently with his mind, probing his two guards. They were conversing with one another on minor personal matters in a bored, lazy way which showed that they were off guard, and he stopped still in the middle of the pathway and launched a blinding blast of thought at them, much as he had done against his three original inquisitors. It was not quite as strong as previously, for his aim was to control them until he could dispose of them quietly, rather than have them fall unconscious at his feet. It was a ticklish moment for he had not been able to experiment with the various degrees of mental power at his command, but it was instantly successful.

Brady could feel the terror in their minds as they struggled to free themselves, but he held them with hypnotic intensity while he forced them to do his will. He looked at them and he could see their torment written in the wide, horror-stricken eyes as they fought to break his control. He

made them follow him through the entrance to the field and, when they understood his intention, it was all he could do to keep control of them. The sweat poured down his face with the intensity of his effort, and the muscles all over his body were taut with strain as he strove to retain the mastery he had won.

Fortunately there were no other Rihnans about and no other being in sight paid any attention to them. Brady took them slowly across toward the tiny cruiser, forcing himself to appear nonchalant, though every fiber of his being told him to run and take off as quickly as possible. He reached the ship at last, and found that the larger bulk of the other ship shielded them from view. It could not have been better for his purposes and his heart soared as he suddenly began to hope that he would get away with it.

He released his hold on the two guards for an instant, and then, before they could recover completely, he hit them with the full force of his mind just as he had done with the first three. The strain was terrific and he felt lances of pain shoot through his eyes from the intensity of his concentration.

It did not last long, no more than five seconds, and in that time he felt their minds scream and die beneath the fury of his attack. Then his focused gaze rested on their limp bodies lying in crumpled heaps before him, and still there was no one to interrupt him.

Brady turned for the entrance to the small cruiser, and climbed through the open hatch, passing into the roomy control turret. There were seats for two persons and he felt a twinge of panic as he prayed that this did not mean that the craft was dual-controlled. His eyes wandered over the switches and dials noting their strange markings, but he felt reasonably confident from their relative positions that he would understand the working of the controls. Hurriedly he traced the feed lines from the fuel tanks to the meters

and the needle convinced him that they were full, so, too, were the oxygen tanks.

He went outside once more to have a hurried look round. The two Rihnnans lay as he had left them. The main entrance to the larger ship was open, which meant that there was probably someone working aboard it; certainly he was in no position to take further chances for the sake of a few extra provisions. He turned back to the cruiser and climbed in once more, closing and locking the hatch behind him. Rapidly he strapped himself into the control seat and switched power to the engines. The dull rumble from behind was music to his ears.

He moved the vessel from her position close to the field buildings, and eased her into a better position for take-off, all the time scanning the area for signs that someone had spotted the movement of the ship. Nothing happened.

Brady's lips were compressed almost to the point of invisibility as he shifted the control lever and turned more power to the engines. The ship moved slowly off the ground, gathering speed and height as she went, and he could feel the power throbbing behind him as she rose.

A sudden flicker on the screen drew Brady's attention. Whatever it was showed clearly on the silver background, and it was coming from behind, quickly. His face hardened as he read the story told by that tiny flicker of red light. His escape had been discovered and the vessel behind him was the pursuit.

Frantically he searched space to see if any shelter presented itself, and to help him he turned on a small search beam and lanced it out ahead. It was now that he could use the detecting equipment of a first-line cruiser—and the armament as well.

His eyes caught a flash of light ahead and to starboard, and for an instant he thought it was a star. He concentrated

on it, and turned the search beam in its direction hoping that it would be the planet he was looking for. On the screen the pursuing craft showed more plainly now, and Brady knew that it would be in shooting distance before long. Eagerly his eyes swept space ahead and in the direction of the flash of light—and then it showed on the search beam indicator. It could be nothing else but a planet, and from its light, now dully visible, a small one. He turned the ship slowly until the planet showed dead ahead and desperately fed more power into the engines. He heard the generators whine shrilly in protest, but every second counted now, and he watched the outline of the planet ahead grow, shining dimly by the reflected light of its star.

It was too late now to wonder about air and water or food; it was a haven which might hold his death, but at least it was a chance he would not have if he stuck to the small vessel and tried to outrun the pursuers behind him.

He locked the controls for a minute while he hurried to the emergency food store at the back of the control room and rapidly stuffed his pockets with a selection of the small bundles he found there; then he slid back into his seat and took the ship down fast into the planet's atmosphere.

There were no clouds and he could see the surface swing below him through the slight atmospheric haze, and then he lost the other ship around the curve of the small globe. He cut his speed, knowing that it would cost him little time, for the pursuers would be forced to slow even more than his own agile craft in order to follow him round. He passed into the night side of the planet and skimmed the surface at a bare thousand feet striving to make out details of the world beneath, and thankful for the light of the one tiny satellite that illuminated, if faintly, the main details of the land. It looked flat and bare and rugged, but he made out the gentle, gleaming curve of a river. He turned for it, knowing that water would be valuable in the near future,

and coaxed the ship down on to a smooth plain some two miles wide that lay between the river and a mountainous strip of country.

He tore open the hatch and dashed for the hills. At any minute the other vessel might appear over the horizon and if they caught him out here in the open it would be the end. The air was thin and cold and even after running a dozen paces he was panting heavily. Fast moving was aided by the lack of gravity but the lack of oxygen offset that advantage. Despite his exertion he was soon shivering and his heart was thumping madly beneath his ribs.

It took him only minutes to reach the shelter of the foothills and he paused for a moment to get his breath before starting to climb the gentle, rock-strewn gradient that led to safer heights. He heard the roar of the approaching vessel long before he could see it, and he thanked the rarified atmosphere for relaying the message so quickly. He found a large boulder and lay down behind it to await events.

His pursuers were in a full-sized battle-cruiser, and they cruised slowly across the plain from end to end before turning and flying low over the spot where his own craft lay. He guessed the ship to be of Tekronian origin, but he knew very well that in a matter like this it would be commanded, if not manned entirely, by Rihnans; at any event there were sure to be a number of Rihnans aboard. They crossed and recrossed the area several times before slowing and hovering almost stationary over the spot where he had landed barely ten minutes before.

Brady frowned slightly as he saw the maneuver and wondered, with sudden uneasiness, what was going on. Then he saw a smaller vessel detach itself from the main hull and coast gently down to land about a hundred yards from his own vessel. He counted a dozen as its occupants climbed out, and watched closely when they moved to search his craft. He could make out no details in the pale light of

the small moon, they were only figures moving on the black and grey background of the plain, and he guessed that all of them were clothed for the climate. It did not take them long to effect the search and they withdrew again to their own vessel.

Brady was puzzled for a moment, but any doubts he had about their intentions were swiftly removed as a short, sharp explosion split the silence and he saw a white ball of flame envelop his ship. He had to shield his eyes from the glare, his heart sick and tired within him, for he knew all too well what the action meant. The world he was on was uninhabited, and the Rihnans knew that with his ship gone there was no possibility of his being able to leave without first surrendering to them.

They didn't even bother to search for him. They merely spread themselves along the river bank, knowing that Brady would eventually be forced to come there for water.

Completely discouraged, exhausted from his exertions, Brady soon fell asleep.

He was still asleep when, suddenly, frenzied activity sprang up among the watchers by the river. The roar of the second craft overhead awakened Brady, and he blinked as he took in the details of the activity that was going on a mile to his left. He watched the guards along the river hurry to their scout ship and rejoin the parent vessel hovering above. With both its auxiliaries stowed away it swung quickly upward, and he guessed from the angle of its ascent that it was in a hurry to gain height. Hardly had it begun to move than he saw the faint aura of its protective screens envelop its squat hull. It was obviously expecting trouble any minute, but from where? And from whom?

And then he saw the other ship. It came howling down out of the heavens, and swept viciously over the top of the rising Tekron cruiser, passing close above it in a daredevil

sweep that sent the cruiser into a tight loop. White blasts of atomic force licked across the short intervening space and caught the Tekronian vessel at the top of its turn. It swung and hung for a minute, striving to regain its shattered equilibrium while its own armament hit back at the attacker. The other ship turned in a wide curve astern of its victim and loosed another shattering blast that licked consumingly around the hull, and Brady read the message of the blasts which ripped aside the Tekronian's protective screens as if they didn't exist. The wild unbelieving hope in his breast was only dulled by the strange markings on the newcomer, and the fact that no one knew where he was.

From five thousand feet the Tekron ship plunged straight down in a death dive hitting the other bank of the river, the billowing cloud of its funeral pyre rising with the explosion which was its requiem.

Brady stood and looked on the scene with amazed eyes and senses battered by the force of that final explosion, and as he looked up, he saw the other ship turning slowly above the column of smoke, warily making sure that there would be no further danger before gliding in to land on the plain before him.

XIII

BRADY STAYED close under the shadow of the boulder, anxiously watching the landing. He was puzzled, for he could conceive of no possible means by which any would-be rescuer could know of his whereabouts.

The ship landed heavily, a trifle too heavily, and Brady's lips tightened as he watched the maneuver. Perhaps she had been damaged in the short encounter with the Tekron

vessel; admittedly she'd had her screens up when she attacked for he had seen the hazy glow of them as she dived above him. Had she been an Earth ship, her screens would almost certainly have protected her from any harm, and that was another theory that crumbled under examination.

The paradoxes of the whole situation were far too involved for Brady at the moment and he fell back on the old maxim, "if in doubt sweat it out." For the time being he would stay under the shelter of the boulder and see what happened.

Already the midship hatch had been opened and groups of uniformed figures were descending, although it was too far away for him to make out any details. They might be humans and they might not; they had the right number of limbs, but the distortion of their clothes acted as camouflage over a distance of almost a mile. They fanned out in several directions, some of them inspecting the blackened wreckage of Brady's own craft and another party marching off toward the river with the obvious intention of looking over the wreckage of their late opponents' vessel.

Brady chewed his lips with indecision. He could take a chance and give himself up—at least there would be food and water for him—or he could stay where he was and die of thirst. The deciding factor was the realization that whatever the people were in that ship they were the enemies of the Rihnans.

During his meditations he had not paid attention to what was going on around the newly landed vessel, and consequently he did not see the erection of a large loud speaker just outside the open hatch. He jumped a foot as a giant, rumbling voice called, "Captain Brady, this is Murphy. If you are in hearing range please show yourself." The stentorian tones resounded through the hills and echoed in fantastic waves above and below him as Brady stood transfixed with the wild hope.

He set his lips tight. It might be a trap, but for the

life of him he could not see how. With sudden decision he straightened and moved out of the shadow of the rock, walking slowly and warily towards the foot of the hills, alert for any sign of danger. He had not gone ten yards before a rumble of comment from the group around the hailer echoed over it, and then a voice called joyously, "Hey skipper, hurry it up, will you." There was no mistaking Murphy's boisterous welcome.

Brady grinned suddenly at the sound, a wave of emotion spreading through him, bringing tears to his eyes. There was elation in his breast as he moved into a stumbling trot, and already he could feel the clasp of Murphy's hand and see before him his colleague's smiling face.

Figures were running toward him from the side of the ship and as they came nearer he searched eagerly, and still a little suspiciously, for signs that they were really human. From fifty yards he could recognize Murphy's hurrying figure way out in front of the others, and then they were together. Murphy crushed his hand in a vise-like grasp, his face showing a pleasure which was at once pleasing and embarrassing.

"Skipper," he panted, "I never thought we'd find you. Lord, I can't believe it."

"Me, neither." Brady's face was all smiles. "How did you manage it?"

"Later," the smile died a little on Murphy's face. "We've got to get out of here before they start looking for that ship of theirs."

Unconsciously Brady reached out to see what was troubling Murphy, and in the second that his mind searched he could see the genuineness of Murphy's greeting and the emotions he felt at finding him. It was like reading a private diary and Brady hastily stopped looking, his face reddening slightly with embarrassment. He felt disgusted with himself for taking advantage of his friend under such circumstances, and

decided that he must not use his new powers again except under exceptional circumstances.

In the general excitement Brady had almost forgotten the urgency of the information he had garnered for Admiral Sherman. The ship required about ten days of repairs to some damage it had incurred en route and, since they couldn't head for home immediately, Brady had said nothing about the Rihnan plans.

But one day while he and Murphy were enjoying dinner, he decided to mention it.

"I didn't want to tell you before," he said, "but I have some interesting news for Sherman about the Rihnan's plans for dealing with us."

He went on and outlined all that he had learned from the Rihnan President, hoping that Murphy would not be too persistent as to how he had learned it, and long before he finished there was a grim look on Murphy's face that he didn't like. His story ended, he said, "Well, that's the lot. Now tell me why you look so upset."

Murphy stirred uneasily. "Well, to begin with, they brought Wilson in from Earth to look at that disappearing trick, and he cracked it as easy as kiss your hand. When I left he had found out how to use it and how to allow a ship to move around under cover of the shield, just like your Rihnan's pals."

"So?"

"So they were working on conversion of the ships at Wilson's idea. It was quite simple and Sherman reckoned they'd have it done in less than two weeks."

"Phew! That's moving some."

"He had to." Murphy leaned forward on one elbow to emphasize the point. "You see he was expecting reinforcements from Earth any day, and he wanted to use the com-

bined fleets as soon as possible to make an attack on the rest of the Galaxy."

A cold hand gripped Brady's heart. "How long before the attack?" he asked.

"We were due back in seventeen days. The fleets were due to move in twenty-one. That gave us another three for emergencies—after that we were to be wiped off the slate as missing, believed destroyed."

"And now?"

"I reckon we shall be five days late, sir."

"Do you know Sherman's plans?" Brady asked. "Which way he was going?"

"Sure. He was going to make a main thrust through the center of the Galaxy, taking odd systems as he came to them and jumping from one to another until a full fleet was forced on him. That way he hoped to split the Galaxy in half and finish it off at leisure, but if what you say is true—"

"He'll hit one of the Rihnan fleets and have the other two outflank him before he knows what's hit him. Hell and damnation." Brady thumped the table with his fists and got up to look unseeingly out of the viewport. "I reckon their numerical superiority as something over ten to one."

Murphy whistled. "As much as that?"

"Probably more."

They were silent for several long minutes, each trying to think of a solution to the problem.

"We might try to intercept the fleets, sir," said Murphy suddenly. "If your information is correct the Rihnan fleets will cover the Galactic center proper, they won't bother about the fringe systems—they'll try and protect the heart of the Galaxy until their other two fleets come up to help them."

"That's true."

"It should take five or six days before the two fleets come into direct contact, and given a bit of luck and no opposition we might make an interception in time."

Brady calculated silently. Murphy was working on fractions, but if he was right they might just possibly do it. Anyway, it was worth a try.

"If you can get a day out of your chief engineer," he began.

"I'll get two," broke in Murphy grimly as he rose from the table. "I'll go and see him now."

There followed twelve days of such concentrated work and endeavor as Brady had never known. Every man in the ship from himself down was pressed into service for the repairs, but despite it all there were constant setbacks. At a critical moment when they were hoping for only another day's work a nuclear-fission jet developed a fault which should never have been there and added three days to the work. When he heard of it Murphy nearly went mad with rage and threatened to have the makers, back on Earth, on a charge of treason if ever he got back there safely.

Their troubles were not confined solely to the repairs, for while they were thus immobilized they detected several vessels cruising at some distance from them, and the pattern of their movements indicated that they were there for one purpose only—to hunt Brady and his rescuers. Though the Terrans were well hidden on the planet's satellite, they worried about the seeming persistence of their Rihnan pursuers.

In addition, Murphy was worried about getting the ship home in one piece, but Brady gave most of his thoughts to deciding how much, of all that had happened to him, he should talk about. The information that was of strategic importance to the Terran fleets would have to be passed on to Admiral Sherman if he got the chance, but that regarding his own personal affairs was a different kettle of fish.

Brady had been careful, since he'd returned to the company of his own race that no hint of his new mental

powers should become apparent. His one embarrassing experience with Murphy had convinced him that while his powers could be useful to Earthmen, they could also be a considerable source of embarrassment. He also worried about the ultimate use to which these gifts might be put if they were utilized by the more unscrupulous members of his race; he knew that they could be a powerful source of evil as well as good.

Brady decided, for the time being, to keep quiet and see what happened.

He was alone in his cabin, when there was a knock at the door and Murphy entered in response to his, "Come in."

Brady was sitting at the desk writing and he looked up and smiled as he saw Murphy standing beside him.

"It couldn't be good news at last, could it?" he asked.

Murphy smiled grimly in return. "The Chief has just reported that we'll be ready in twelve hours," he replied. "The fission jet is fixed and has been tested. All we need to do now is straighten up for maximum efficiency and get out of here."

Brady pursed his lips and looked up at the deckhead, "Well," he sighed, "I guess we've got things to talk about."

"You can say that again sir."

"Yes, I guess we both mean the same thing." Brady relaxed and tapped the end of his styloopen pensively on the desk.

"Those ships buzzing about up there."

"Exactly."

"Well, with that information you've got burning a hole in your brain, we'll have to get out pretty soon if we're going to do anything with it."

Brady nodded. "Yes, we can't afford to delay our departure any longer. I had hoped that after a fortnight they would have stopped looking for us and concluded that we managed to get away safely. I suppose that ship you

destroyed didn't manage to get a message away before she crashed?"

Murphy shook his head decisively. "No, sir. We had a complete radio blanket down over all waves as soon as we knew the position. It would not have been possible."

"I thought not. Well, what do we do now?"

"There's one possibility I've been thinking about, sir," Murphy began.

Brady nodded for him to continue, reflecting with some amusement that Murphy still looked on him as the commanding officer instead of the passenger that he really was.

"It's obvious that when we do move we must move quickly," went on Murphy. "We can't get out of this crack in the rocks just to have a look round and then pop back in again if things don't look too healthy."

"Check."

"I suggest we send up a one-man tender which can move slowly and stands less chance of being spotted. It has all the necessary detecting equipment, and can easily dodge back if necessary."

"What if it's spotted?"

Murphy's lips tightened. "Well, if it is, it'll be obvious to the pilot of the tender and he will have orders not to come back."

There was a long minute of silence while the meaning of Murphy's words sank in, then Brady nodded slowly.

"Suicide mission. Will the pilot do it?"

Murphy shifted uneasily. "I think we have someone who will volunteer."

"Yes, there usually is someone mad enough in any crew." Brady's tone was sad in the gentle way he said it. "How do we pick up the tender? After all, there isn't going to be much time to get her down here again, pick her up, and then blast off ourselves. That would take every bit of three

minutes, and in three minutes a safe area could become a danger spot."

"I've thought of that, sir." Those tenders can travel fast for a short distance, almost half the speed of the parent ship, and if we can synchronize speeds for just thirty seconds—"

"A mid-space pick up, eh?"

"Exactly, sir."

Brady studied the floor between his feet for some seconds, then he remarked quietly, "You could lose the tender; there will be no time for a second try if the first attempt is unsuccessful."

"The pilot will be warned."

Brady sighed and stood up slowly. "You are the captain of this ship, Commander. Anything you decide I shall, of course, agree to." He felt, as he said it, that he was refusing the responsibility which Murphy didn't want, but there was no other way. He was just a passenger, and all he could offer was advice.

Murphy, however, appeared relieved. He moved toward the door and said, "Thank you, sir, I'll make the necessary arrangements."

The action bells rang through the vessel exactly eleven hours and forty minutes afterward, waking Brady as he lay asleep in his bunk. He rose and pulled on his uniform, then made his way up to the main control bridge. As he reached it he saw, through the forward viewport, the slim shape of the tender as it maneuvered its way slowly and carefully out of the rocky chasm that had served as a repair shop for nearly two weeks. Murphy was watching it anxiously.

He turned as Brady entered the bridge. "Tender has just left, sir."

"So I see," replied Brady. "I hope the pilot is lucky."

The speaker on the bulkhead beside them droned suddenly

and metallicity. "Donovan here. Donovan calling Control."

"Tender's pilot," Murphy informed him briefly as he snapped over a switch. "Go ahead, Donovan, Murphy here."

"Donovan," continued the speaker. "I'm level with the top of the hole, sir, and I'm moving up slowly. No warning on the detectors yet . . . I'm fifty feet up, still nothing . . . five hundred feet—nothing."

Tension mounted in the control room; they all knew that the higher the tender ascended the more vulnerable it was to detection itself. Just one spark on any alien screen within a few million miles, and it would be all over for Donovan and his tiny craft—possibly for them as well.

"I'm giving him up to ten thousand feet" said Murphy. "He'll have practically three hundred degree coverage by then and that should be good enough."

Brady nodded.

"Five thousand," reported Donovan. "No signs. I'm going out faster now. Eight thousand—still nothing."

Murphy punched a pattern of buttons on the remote control unit. A dull steady rumble began to surge through the great hull as power was fed into the drive generators, and Brady could feel life pulsing through the ship. The jagged sides of the chasm began to move slowly past them as the ship lifted itself from the smooth surface of the rock below it.

Brady hoped that Murphy was not being too precipitous.

Donovan's voice came jubilantly through the speaker. "Ten thousand feet, all clear. I'm heading out fast and awaiting pickup. Out."

Murphy spoke almost softly into the intercom. "All hands, all hands. Prepare for maximum drive acceleration in one minute."

The dot on the screen that was the tender was coming back toward them now as the ship gathered speed, and Brady realized what a tricky maneuver it would be to re-

trieve the small ship at such a speed; he saw from Murphy's face that he, too, realized it.

Speed mounted as Murphy fed more power to the drive units and in a few seconds the tender loomed large on the screen ahead of them. Gazing from the viewport, Brady could see it, not a great distance ahead, a tiny speck glistening against the black background of space.

"Stand by to pick up tender." Murphy gave the order tersely, and Brady could visualize the space-suited team standing by the open hatch with grapple magnets ready to draw the speeding speck inside to its resting place amidships. In seconds it was just ahead of them, travelling only slightly slower as Donovan matched his speed with that of the parent ship. It dropped back slowly, drawing nearer to the larger craft which was still accelerating.

Murphy stared straight ahead, obviously reluctant to witness the perilous proceedings, and Brady did not blame him, for his judgment could easily be affected by what he saw. It was better for him to wait for progress reports over the intercom.

Brady turned back in time to see the grapples shoot across the intervening space to the smaller ship. They seemed to hang for a moment and then, suddenly, they bridged the gap so that the tender was fixed to the parent ship as by an umbilical cord. Brady let out a deep breath; this was the hardest part of the operation.

The tender drew nearer and nearer the hatch until it was partly obscured by the curve of the hull, and then it was gone, clicking into place like part of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

As he turned away Brady heard the intercom buzz. "Tender stowed, hatch secured and cleared away."

XIV

MURPHY PUSHED the ship hard all through the first four days of the trip.

He and Brady had estimated that if they could do the trip in just over five days they would meet up with Sherman's combined fleets some thirty hours before their contact with the combined Rihnan fleets in the central sector. It would be a tight margin, but if Sherman could have even that much warning of the trap awaiting him it would be enough. Their greatest worry was the possibility that they would have to crash through the Rihnan fleet, for they would have no time to make a detour that would bypass the enemy completely.

"Our only hope is to hit them from the rear and rely on speed to carry us through before they can get organized," remarked Murphy for the twentieth time.

"You can be pretty sure they'll be lying under cover of their invisibility shield," replied Brady.

"Yes, sir, but I'll lay odds they have ships scouting from the forward stellar groups. If they get warning to the main fleets that we're going through, we'll run into trouble before long." Brady said nothing—they'd been over it so many times before.

He looked at the star map above the control board. On it was shown, in red, the area he had calculated to be the furthest limit of the Rihnan fleet. That area was barely an hour's flight ahead of them, and if his calculations were only slightly off, they might already be on the verge of danger.

The whole ship was closed up to action stations, and the protective screens were ready for instant erection at the first sign of trouble. Murphy did not want to strain the ship's

power resources excessively by erecting the screens prematurely.

Murphy turned to look at Brady, his face white and tense. "I almost wish something would happen right now," he said.

Brady grinned ironically. "If it comes at all in the next three hours it'll be too soon."

"You think it'll take three hours, sir?"

"Certainly not longer. They won't have their fleets spread out much more, and I should not think the central sector of the Galaxy could be better defended than by a line from Cassiopeia and Perseus toward Taurus and Orion."

"It's a big area."

Brady nodded. "Yes, but a definite one. If Sherman has got enough reinforcements from Earth he can break that line easily, and turn the other two fleets as well. But he can only do it if he has warning that the Rihnans are out in strength to stop him. If he walks into a trap he may lose a third of his ships before he knows what's hit him."

"Surely the screens will hold better than that?" objected Murphy.

Brady bared his teeth. "Don't fool yourself, Murphy. This is the pay-off as far as the Rihnans are concerned. They're putting everything into this one punch, and with the odds in their favor they can afford to lose ten ships to our one and still hold the superiority of numbers. It's my guess they wouldn't hesitate to send suicide squads and, if they do, a couple of ships hurling themselves baldheaded from two sides would soon make a mess of a first line cruiser. Her screens would never stand up to the shock."

Murphy gaped at him in horror, for this was the first time Brady had ever voiced such opinions. "Surely they'd never do that?"

Brady nodded soberly. "They would do it all right. Remember, their whole empire rests on this battle—if they

lose it they lose a million years of development, and they become just another race in a Galaxy which will have Man as its master. Put yourself in their shoes, Murphy; you'd try it or die in the attempt." He sighed. "I feel almost sorry for the Rihnans."

"Sorry?" Murphy's voice was shocked as he repeated the word in a scandalized yelp.

"That surprises you? How would you feel if history had at last caught up with you?"

Murphy was silent, but his face revealed that the trend of Brady's conversation was lost on him.

"Ever since their recorded history began the Rihnans have been the top dogs. They overcame calamities that would have smashed another, weaker race. They acted for the good of every race in the Galaxy, even though they themselves skimmed the cream off the milk, so to speak, and now, if they lose one battle, they're finished. In less than a day they can lose the accumulated wealth and experience of a million years, and they will lose it because of their own mistakes."

"Mistakes?"

Brady nodded. "I don't think they ever believed that a race would evolve which would be cleverer than they, so they didn't prepare for that eventuality. They were confident that any younger, greener race could be subdued before it became too powerful. Continued success made them complacent, and that was their first error. Their second was a direct result of the first. They failed to realize that the impossible was actually happening, and that a race had appeared which was capable of harming them, and not only that, but was capable of grabbing their empire. If they had acted as soon as the Centaurans were overrun, they might have conquered the threat before it became dangerous, but they didn't. They had no previous experience to teach them, and they had nothing ready to deal with the threat. So, they sat back

and waited to see what would happen, and they waited too long."

There was a moment's silence as Brady stopped speaking, then Murphy said fervently, "I hope they have waited too long."

"Why?" smiled Brady. "Do you think *we* shall make good rulers for the Galaxy?"

"I don't know." Murphy shook his head vehemently. "I don't know about that. I only know it's where man should be—on the top. The human race would never survive as the lackey of another race. I believe we were created to rule."

"So do I," said Brady softly. "But whether we shall do it well—that is another matter."

The intercom buzzed its warning note and stated briefly: "Unidentifiable craft bearing red, six five."

"Here it comes," said Murphy, and then to the intercom, "Pass all reports for general ship information."

"Detection now bearing red six three, distance ten million."

Murphy flicked two switches on the control board. "All screens," he ordered briefly, and the golden aura of the ship's defenses spread out around the speeding hull.

"Detection now shows three vessels bearing red, five, nine, distance eight million," said the intercom, and without a pause another voice continued. "Add two more bearing green eight two, distance twelve million."

Murphy's face was grim and he flashed a glance at Brady. "Here goes!"

"Bearing red, five oh, four million," said the speaker. "Green, six, seven, nine million," reported the second voice.

"With luck," said Murphy, "we'll only have to fight them one at a time."

"Strategical error," commented Brady.

"Luckily." Murphy's hand flicked the intercom switch.

"All batteries prepare for action against red attackers. Repeat, red attackers first."

Brady noted that he was turning the ship slightly off her course, toward the nearer group on the port side. Murphy was using good tactics in trying to finish off the nearest group before the others could hit them from the opposite side. If he could dispose of the three to port first of all, he would not have to slow down or take evasive action against the two from the starboard side.

"Red attackers, now bearing four nine, two million."

In a few seconds they could expect the first blasts to be thrown at them and Brady automatically braced himself for the roll which would be certain to come.

Murphy ordered quietly, "Port batteries fire at will when in range. Repeat, fire at will when in range."

The intercom said, "Red attackers bearing four seven, one million."

"Any minute now," remarked Murphy, and hardly were the words out of his mouth when space around them whitened and the ship rolled gently as the attacking blasts hit her screens. She righted herself almost instantly, then rolled again as her own armament returned the fire. Three rapid salvos were delivered in as many seconds and the last one had barely died away when the hull rolled again more violently, as another and heavier attack was made.

"No damage, screens holding," came the report over the speaker. "One down, two to go."

Murphy's eyes glinted and his teeth showed white as he turned to look at Brady. "A nice return for our investment" he remarked.

"I hope it continues."

The ship rolled again as her armament struck back and still Murphy held her to the course that led to Sherman's fleet, although by now she was taking a heavy pounding from the two remaining ships. Possibly the lack of tactical

maneuvering puzzled the attackers, and they did not press in as closely as Brady had expected, but even so there was a possibility that they would damage their prey if they were allowed to attack too heavily.

Another blast from the port batteries rolled the hull slightly, and bare seconds afterward the intercom reported, "Two down, one to go."

Murphy straightened the ship and kept all power possible fed to the drive. If they could dispose of the five ships attacking them they might get clear away before another force was dispatched to deal with them.

Brady's thoughts were much along the same lines, but he reached the conclusion that there would be other ships ahead waiting for them if they managed to crash this first line.

The firing was almost continuous from both sides now as the starboard batteries opened up on the two ships coming in from the opposite direction and to Murphy's consternation some damage was reported from the port after-compartments as a blast from the single ship on that side caused a momentary lapse in the screens. Fortunately it was not serious and the speed of the vessel was not impeded. Less than a minute later the port batteries took revenge for the damage done by destroying the remaining vessel on that side, and bare seconds later the starboard batteries marked up their first success. The remaining attacker turned and fled.

They sped on through the starlit depths as the drive ate up the distance between them and the Terran fleets. Two hours later they ran into an ambush.

This time they counted upward of fifty ships stretched dead across their path in four close-packed lines, one behind the other, at slightly different levels. There were grim faces on the bridge as the detector's message was read and they realized that the Rihnans were determined to prevent their joining up with Sherman.

As they approached, the four ranks of enemy ships moved into an arrowhead formation with the greatest concentration of strength based in a round and blunted tip. They were moving away from them at a much lower speed but on the same course.

Murphy looked at Brady significantly when the news was relayed to them.

"Smart boys," was Brady's reply to his unspoken question.

"We've got to go through." Murphy flicked the intercom switches before him. "All batteries. Independent fire as you bear. We're going through on our present course."

The speaker buzzed and announced, "Enemy ahead, two million and dropping."

Six leaping blasts of force hit them at once from the near end of the enemy lines and the ship leaped and bucked like a runaway horse as she rode the blast and plunged on without a pause. They were within range, and hardly had the ship steadied than her own armament thundered in reply, a long rolling burst as each battery took its range and fired at will.

"Two down," came the laconic report from the observation control.

"No hits, no damage," reported damage control in the same breath.

For five minutes they ran a gauntlet of fire and flame that in their wildest nightmares they couldn't have imagined. The ingenuity of Terran science was tested in a crucible of fire that all the demons of Hell couldn't have duplicated.

But the screens held.

And then it was over. Behind them lay a shattered line of cruisers, a third of them destroyed by the flaming might of the Terran armament, and six others wrecked by collision with their allies. A futile chase began as a handful of the enemy rushed in pursuit, but they were too late, for the flying

speck that had been their prey was far ahead and increasing the distance with every second.

There was silence on the bridge for several long seconds while the victorious crew responded to an old human impulse, and offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

XV

BOTH BRADY and Murphy slept for several hours after their run through the Rihnan fleets, but a lookout was kept for any further signs of attack. None came.

Murphy was called to the control room at the first sign that contact had been made with Sherman's fleets, and he got there to find one single, unobtrusive dot on the long-range detection screen.

"The lead scout I reckon, sir," said Barton who was the watch officer.

Murphy nodded. "I shouldn't be surprised. We'll be up with her in fifteen minutes. You'd better call Captain Brady."

Murphy watched the dot carefully for the next few minutes. Not by so much as a fraction of a degree did it alter course, but kept to a steady, low speed. Under other circumstances Murphy would have dismissed it as a cruising trader or passenger ship, but he knew that such could not be the case at the present time and in that particular corner of space.

Brady reached the control room to find that the dot on the screen had grown larger and that it had been joined by five other dots, all farther out and spread in a long line with a considerable distance between each ship and its neighbor.

"Sherman is running the main fleet under cover of the field," Murphy told him. "Those ships must be the section

scouts acting as guides and lookouts for the fleets in the field."

"Any recognition signals yet?" asked Brady.

"Yes, sir, they're being passed now. Sherman will know we're around in a few minutes."

"Good, get a message off to him asking for an immediate and urgent conference."

"I've already done so, sir," smiled Murphy.

Sherman's eagerness to see Brady was apparent by the summons he sent to join him aboard the flagship at once. He even went so far as to bring his ship out of the field to facilitate the meeting.

He was waiting in his cabin with half a dozen staff officers when Brady reached his ship, and his pleasure at seeing Brady was obvious as he rose, beaming, to shake hands with the returned captive.

"I never thought Murphy would pull it off," were his first clear remarks.

Brady grinned, "Very nearly didn't, sir."

Sherman nodded. "I'll have to hear the whole story some time, but now, what is so urgent?"

Brady sobered at once.

"I picked up some information on Tekron, sir, which made it imperative that I reached you first."

Sherman listened without a murmur while Brady repeated his story. When it was finished Brady sat back and waited for the reactions. All eyes were on Sherman as he sat, deep in thought, for several long minutes.

"How long before we shall be within detection range of the Rihnan fleets, basing their position on Captain Brady's estimate?" He snapped the question at the lean, black-haired staff captain in charge of fleet detection.

"I'd say—around twenty hours, allowing for a safety margin," was the reply.

"Right." Sherman sat stiffly in his chair. "Gentlemen I will

outline my plan of action, in the light of Captain Brady's information, by telling you what I want you to do. From that it should be self-evident. I shall issue immediate orders for the fleets to stop and pull in the scout ships."

There was blank, amazed silence. Sherman rose and moved across to the star map that loomed against one wall of the cabin.

"If Brady is right the Rihnan fleets are concentrated in this area here." He touched a series of buttons at the base of the map. "I intend to detach the seventh, tenth, seventeenth and twentieth cruiser squadrons, together with their attending light destroyers, under the command of Rear Admiral Thornton. They'll go under cover of the field, but with one leading scout, along a route to the Galactic north of the Pleiades, and back north of Capella so that they can come down to the rear of the Rihnan lines. The remainder of the fleet will lie here for a sufficient time to allow the squadrons to get into position and will then proceed to meet the Rihnans, but not under cover of the field."

The final remark brought a buzz of surprised and angry comment from the assembled officers. Brady sat with tight lips.

Sherman was no fool, and he must have a good reason for his actions.

Sherman waited until the noise had died down and then continued. "I realize your objections, gentlemen, and I appreciate them, but I have a good reason for what I propose. The Rihnans don't know that we have broken the secret of their field, and they hope to take us completely by surprise when we reach the lines that Brady has shown us. Well, we'll let them think that. They will expect to meet a fleet sailing openly, in perfect formation, through space toward them." He smiled grimly. "And we won't disappoint them. They'll have to come from behind their field to fight us and they'll do so as soon as we're nicely in the trap, but

there will be two things that they won't bargain for. One, every ship in the fleet will be waiting for them the moment they come out of that field, and they will meet such a blast of fire as they never dreamed existed. Then, just as they realize their mistake, the main fleet will vanish behind a screen of their own making. I think that should create sufficient confusion for the detached squadron to hit them in the rear just when and where they least expect it."

Sherman leaned back with a satisfied smile on his face. "Any questions?"

Tension relaxed as he stopped speaking and there was a rustling of bodies as the others shifted in their seats and considered the plan.

Gerard, the communications officer for the fleets, lifted his hand and asked, "What about the other two fleets, sir?"

"They will be called upon, that's obvious," agreed Sherman. "But they will not come expecting to deal with anything but an already half defeated foe. If we can wipe out the central portion of the combined Rihnan fleets without serious loss to ourselves, I think we shall have a considerable psychological advantage when we meet the rest. In any case, the detached squadrons will resume their patrol under cover of the field and independent of us so that we can call them in as a surprise diversion against the other fleets."

"Suppose we can't handle the first fleet?" asked Grierson, the fleet armaments officer.

Sherman's eyes were hard and his lips thin as he answered, "*We've got to.*"

Sherman gave the detached squadrons thirty-six hours to reach their assigned position. That position was based on the information Brady and Murphy had produced concerning the approximate location of the Rihnan fleets and, although it was only based on observation, Sherman hoped it would remain more or less static despite the fluidity of movement

that could be expected when a large force was spread over a wide area.

The order to switch out of invisibility was given only a minute or so before the order for the Terran fleets to proceed on their long journey, and Brady was on the bridge of the flagship with Sherman and other staff officers when the orders were given. It was a sight he knew he would remember as long as he lived. At one moment space around them was empty, save for themselves and a dozen other vessels. They seemed to be alone in the star-strewn depths of space, a few insignificant dots lost in the immensity of the Universe. Then, in an instant, the whole scene was changed, and, where there had been only the blackness of space, there lay line upon line of twinkling dots in regular formation above, below and to the rear of the flagship. In countless hundreds they swept across the field of vision, produced, it seemed, by a magician who worked only on a cosmic scale.

As he looked, Brady realized that here, before his eyes, lay the whole might of one tiny planet revolving around an insignificant star in an unfrequented corner of space. In the row upon row of ships lay the destiny of a race who had barely existed at a time when their enemies were masters of the Galaxy. His mind reeled at the vistas that opened before him, and he felt a sudden fear that they might fail, and then he felt another fear—that they might succeed and be found wanting in the tasks that would lie ahead of them.

Brady saw, with terrible clarity, what victory would mean to the Human Race; he saw what defeat would mean, also, and he wondered which would be worse. Defeat would mean the end of everything; the slate would be wiped clean so that the Galaxy in general, and the Rihnans in particular, would never be threatened again. Victory—he wondered if, in a few hundred years it would be called "victory"—would mean complete dedication to the task of ruling the Galaxy, and it might be that such a task, for so young a race, would

prove an impossibility. Mankind might bend under the strain and collapse under the weight of the responsibility and, with the Rihnans gone, who would take its place? The coming battle might mean the end of the Galaxy as a united force; the spark of genius might go from it never to return.

Three hours before they reached the position that Brady and Murphy had estimated as the front line of the Rihnan fleets, the entire crews on all the vessels were alerted and every possible weapon, both offensive and defensive, was manned. Despite the power lag involved, all protective screens were erected and every possible precaution put into effect.

They stayed at action stations for nearly five hours, but Brady did not tire of watching the massed ranks of ships as they marched in formation across the heavens. Sherman had done a good job of arranging the formations. He had formed them into two giant boxes, one within the other, so that maximum firepower and defendability could be achieved with a minimum loss of tactical distribution. It was unorthodox, but it fitted the emergency.

Everyone from Sherman down knew that, when it came, the onslaught would be sudden, vicious, and possibly overwhelming. Even so, the complete suddenness of it stunned and dazed the entire fleet for almost five seconds, and in those five seconds, seventy-three ships vanished under the raging holocaust of fire that hit the fleet. The heavens were empty and serene, just as they had been for hours past, and all the peace in the Universe seemed to lie over the Terran fleet. Then, in an instant, the space around them erupted in a mighty spasm of fire and flame as line upon line, squadron upon squadron, the attackers appeared around the twin boxes that were the Terran fleets and, for vital seconds, poured unreturned fire into the ambushed ships.

But Sherman's strategy worked despite those vital five

seconds. The time lag might have been six times as long had Brady not brought him warning, and the losses he would have sustained might have been crippling. And then the fire was returned. The Rihnans staggered under the viciousness of a blow they had not expected and saw their massed ranks crumbling around them under the lightning reaction of their prey.

Sherman gave them just two minutes of fire, but in those two minutes their losses were enormous. As one cruiser captain said, it was like shooting clay pigeons, and the Rihnans' reaction was just what Brady had predicted—suicide tactics. They crashed their ships wildly against the defensive screens of the Terran ships and took their opponents with them in brilliant displays of fire and flame, as the overloaded generators disintegrated under the sudden colossal strain to which they were subjected.

Sherman flashed out the order for invisibility. As the flagship descended into the blackness behind the field, Sherman turned a grim face to Brady.

"We've had heavy losses—I hope we can sustain them."

"The Rihnans' are heavier, sir, and I bet our disappearance has played havoc with them. Let's hope Thornton can follow up the advantage we've given him."

Sherman consulted the wall clock. "I'm giving him ten minutes. With the element of surprise in his favor he should be able to accomplish more in that time than we could."

"I'd give a lot to have been around the Rihnans when we vanished," remarked Brady with a grin. "It must have been quite a shock for them."

"And not the last they'll get, I hope."

The minutes ticked by, and tension mounted on the bridge as the time drew near for them to emerge from beneath the field. The brief battle had whetted the appetites of the entire fleet and the men craved action.

The steady buzz of conversation had an eagerness about it

which denoted the state of mind among the officers, and even the ratings manning the technical equipment found relief in low-toned speculation about what was happening outside the field. Brady could hear snatches of conversation, and he concentrated on them in an effort to take his mind off the slowly moving hands of the clock, but before he could form any conclusions he heard Sherman's barked announcement: "Twenty seconds. Stand by the field control."

There was an instant silence as all eyes turned to the clock. The hand flicked over the zero mark at the top of the dial and instantly the field control cut the power to the circuit. Brady heard someone mutter, "Here we go," and then they came back into the reality of the Universe:

They emerged from an oasis of peace to the violence of the Pit itself, for all space around them was a blasted, fiery cataclysm of chaos. That Thornton's squadrons had done their job, and done it well, there could be no doubt; from the turmoil that greeted them Brady could picture the scene as the Rihnans had been hit from behind by a fleet they had no knowledge of, and hit while they were still stunned by the astounding disappearance of an apparently crippled enemy. Of Thornton's fleet there was no sign—it had gone under the shelter of the field bare seconds before. The timing of the whole operation was perfect.

Thornton had left behind not a fleet, not even the semblance of a fleet, but a shattered remnant whose crews were too dazed to offer even a token resistance to the re-emerged fleets of Sherman's force. Individuals fired their weapons in blind instinct and not on the orders of their superiors, for the fire control had broken down. In all but a handful of ships, and every ship that fired was destroyed by the Terran vessels. The Rihnans were caught in their own trap, for the crews they commanded were not Rihnan, and could not even *begin* to understand the forces that pounded them. They had been taught that Rihnan technology was invincible,

and when it failed them they had nowhere to turn for support. As they saw their sister ships vanish in blasts of fire and fury, their discipline collapsed, and dozens of ships were destroyed simply because their crews had lost the very basis of their existence—their belief in the omnipotence of Rihnan culture.

In half an hour it was over. The dead were never counted, and even the exact number of Rihnan ships destroyed remained a mystery, although it must have been well over three thousand. The other two Rihnan fleets, coming up fast in response to their colleagues' call, found only the blazing remnants of the once mighty machine that was their third arm. From the few pitiful survivors they heard stories which far outstripped the real horror of the scene. They heard tales of phantom fleets, of invincible and terrible weapons which destroyed everything in their path, and of a devilish race whose powers were beyond description and whose fleets were even now maneuvering to attack the two remaining fleets.

Such was, in effect, the case, for Sherman had drawn off his main force under cover of the field, and was regrouping to fall upon his reinforcements as soon as possible. Thornton's squadrons, whose losses had been negligible, had also drawn off to await the order to attack from the rear when the pace became too hot for Sherman's forces.

Twelve hours after the first encounter, Sherman struck. With three scouts ahead of his main force to give warning when they approached the Rihnan fleets, he moved in fast to deal them damaging blows while they were still stunned by the shock of their main fleet's defeat. The Terrans emerged from the field well within firing range of their prey, and in three sudden thrusts the first line of cruisers split the Rihnan fleet into four separate sections ready for the heavier vessels coming up behind. The first attack did

little damage; it was intended only as a softening-up process, but it was enough.

The Rihnans broke and fled before Sherman could come to close grips with them, and Thornton's vessels did not fire one shot at them or indeed see anything to fire at. In two hours the whole project was over, and the victory was overwhelming. What Rihnan ships had not fled were captured, and their alien crews were eager to proclaim their loyalty to the new conquerors. It was the Centaurans all over again, clear proof of how great Rihnan complacency must have been.

Sherman acted rapidly after the Terran victory. He dispatched task forces to take control of the surrounding systems and thus consolidate the Terran sphere of influence. The effect of his action was to make his headquarters on Ortan impregnable, and to insure that the home system, Sol, was completely protected. The Rihnan defeat was complete and absolute; there was no chance of their being able to integrate sufficient force to threaten the Terran position, even supposing they were resilient enough to attempt such an action.

The remainder of the fleet was split in two parts; the first, under Thornton, was based upon Tekron, so that it would be well placed to deal with any trouble that might arise in that sector of the Galaxy; the second part, still under Sherman, returned to Ortan.

XVI

THE GRAND ACTION, as it became known, had been over nearly four weeks, and on Ortan the main portion of the Terran fleet had already begun to slip into the easy ways of peace.

Murphy was in the officers' mess reading the latest news

from Earth with avid interest when Brady entered the room and wandered across to sit down opposite him. So meditative was he that he didn't even hear Murphy's cheery greeting.

Murphy put down the paper and eyed him thoughtfully for a second. Brady was certainly bothered.

"Anything wrong, sir?"

Brady looked up with sudden surprise, "Wrong? No-no, there's nothing wrong. I just saw a couple of those antennae people outside the spaceport. First I've seen since Tekron, and I started wondering about them."

Murphy grinned. "I expect the Centaurans will tell you all you want to know."

"Yes, I'll make some inquiries when I get time."

"Have you seen the news, sir?" Murphy offered him a paper. "Came in from Earth yesterday."

"Yes." Brady twisted his face in disgust. "All blathering about the Grand Action and crowing over our victory against 'those alien monsters, the Rihnans.'" He shook his head. "I just wish some of those editors had been there and seen it—they might have changed their ideas if they'd seen a few hundred ships going up in fire and smoke at the same instant."

Murphy nodded in silence. He had had those feelings, too, for the past few weeks, for now that the fine flush of victory was over, a reaction had set in. Even Sherman felt it, judging by his irascible temper recently.

"I feel almost sorry for the Rihnans now," Murphy said slowly after a minute.

"You're stealing my line," replied Brady with a slight smile.

"Yes, sir, I know, but it took that battle to make me realize what it must have meant to them. I thought about it a lot during the trip home and I tried to see the human race in the same position. I tried to picture us as a race that had

ruled the Galaxy in undisputed might for a million years, and then another people come along, an upstart crew that has only just discovered how to cross space. One fight lasting less than a day and a million years of effort go poof—and we become just another race that has reached the end of the line. Well, I couldn't do it, but I think I know how they must be feeling."

Brady nodded soberly, and Murphy continued. "I couldn't help thinking too, sir, how easy everything has been for us right from the start. Ever since that first contact with the Rihnans on Sirius Five every move we've made has been successful. It almost seems that they were never *meant* to win. It's strange. . . ."

But Brady was not listening, indeed he was no longer there, and only the swinging door showed where he had departed. Murphy gaped at it for a second, and then returned to his paper with a shrug. He had known Brady far too long to be disturbed over-much at any eccentric action his superior took.

Brady made straight for Sherman's office, and was immediately admitted by the Admiral's secretary. Sherman looked up in surprise as Brady entered.

"Hello, Captain, I was just about to send for you. You've saved a messenger a trip, anyway. Sit down." He waved Brady to a chair at the side of his desk. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Brady settled himself comfortably and asked, "You remember I told you that I thought efforts were being made to get me off Tekron sir?"

Sherman frowned for a second. "Oh, yes. You mentioned a being with antennae sprouting from his forehead. You thought he was an Earthman. Yes, I remember, what about it?"

"I've just seen a couple of them outside the spacefield sir, and I'm just a little bit curious about them."

"Oh, why?"

"Have any passenger vessels landed here recently?"

Sherman shook his head. "No, we restricted the planet nearly two months ago, and there has been no interstellar craft apart from fleet vessels for nearly four months."

Brady nodded. "That means they must have been here before that. If I might ask a favor, sir, I'd like to question a Centauran and find out more about them."

"Are you worried about them?"

"No, not worried, just curious."

"I'll get a couple of Centauran officials in and we'll ask them about it." Sherman pressed a buzzer on his desk and gave the necessary orders.

Soon, two Centaurans entered and with the aid of a small translator Sherman questioned them about the antennaed beings. While he did so, Brady sat and listened attentively to the answers.

It appeared that the race was known as the Alkora, and they inhabited a small planet revolving around a little known star on the edge of the Galaxy, at a considerable distance from Ortan, the Centauran sun. They were a small race, numbering only a few hundred millions, and although they were frequently seen in ones and twos on most inhabited planets in the Galaxy, very few of them travelled to any great extent. Those that did were usually on small missions of trade and commerce.

When they mentioned trade and commerce, the Centaurans' attitude was contemptuous, and further questions from Sherman elicited the fact that the Alkora were one of the poorest races in the Galaxy. They had no mineral deposits of any importance, and any advanced form of technology was quite beyond them. They relied on exchanging the simple products of their agricultural economy for small articles and

tools of metal, which helped to improve their lot at home. They lived in small, scattered communities spread across their planet, and such was their poverty that they were quite unable to come within the great technological orbit that encompassed all the other sentient races of the Galaxy.

And that was all the Centaurans knew. No, neither of them had been to Alkor, though they knew of people who had. Yes, they could point out the star on the map, and one of them proceeded to do so. Further questions failed to produce any more details, and from the way they answered, the Centaurans could not have cared less about the subject. They were evidently surprised that their Terran overlord should show so much interest in so minor a race. At last Sherman dismissed them.

As the door closed behind their departing figures, he leaned back in his chair and looked at Brady who was sitting thoughtfully beside him.

"Well, does that answer all your questions, Captain?"

Brady stirred and shook his head slowly. "Not really, sir. I know more about them, but I'm still puzzled."

"Oh, why?"

There Brady was stumped. He could not give all his reasons to Sherman without arousing doubts about his own sanity. He shrugged and replied lamely, "Just a hunch, I guess."

Sherman smiled. "I think what you need is a trip back to Earth."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Sherman laughed. "I thought that would interest you. I'm sending a confidential report to the President, and I'm not trusting it to code and radio. It's not extremely urgent or I might, but I felt that Bannerman would show more interest if you took it to him in person."

Brady's problem faded suddenly as Bannerman's name was mentioned. That was the answer! The only person to whom

he could safely tell his story and demonstrate his powers was the President. Bannerman's insight and judgment were rare even in that enlightened age, and from his past contacts with the President, Brady was confident that his tale would be heard sympathetically. That, plus the fact that he would be going home, lifted the cloud from his mind for the first time in weeks. For a moment he was elated, and then his mind turned back to the Alkora. If he went home and told the President everything, there was little chance that he would be able to return to space for quite a while, and he wanted badly to learn more about this race that had aroused his interest to such an extent. Finally he said:

"I want to get back to Earth, sir, naturally, but—" Brady stirred uneasily, obviously uncertain how Sherman was going to react.

"But you want to visit Alkor."

Brady blinked in surprise. "Yes, sir, I do, but—"

"I'm a bit of a psychologist as well as an Admiral." Sherman rose and walked across to the window. "You've got something on your mind, Brady, that's quite clear. I don't know what it is, but if you think it's important, I feel justified in backing you. What do you want to do?"

He turned to look at his junior who had risen and was looking quietly and seriously at him. "I do think there's something wrong, sir, but what it is I just cannot guess. What I require is a ship to take me to Alkor and have a look round for myself." He shrugged helplessly. "There may be nothing, but—"

"On the other hand there may be something." Sherman nodded, understandingly. "All right, what ship do you want?"

"Something small and fast but well armed."

Sherman walked back to his desk and scrutinized a list which lay to one side of it. "Let's see—I can spare a CX light cruiser. Will that do?"

"A hundred crew," Brady nodded. "Yes, sir, and—"

"Yes," broke in Sherman. "Murphy can be your number two."

Brady flushed with embarrassment. "Thank you, sir." He was quite well aware that his loyalty to Murphy was something of a joke in the fleet, but he was prepared to put up with it for the sake of their friendship.

"When do you want to start?"

"I think forty-eight hours will be enough, sir. I want to get my old crew together as far as possible."

Sherman nodded his agreement and said, "I'll issue the necessary orders at once and you can go ahead as you wish. I'll get someone else for the trip to Earth."

"There'll be no lack of volunteers, sir."

"I'd like to volunteer myself," replied the Admiral with some feeling.

Alkora's star was a yellow disc, tiny and almost without diameter in the center of the forward viewport.

As he watched their destination drawing nearer, Brady became more tense. The tension had been with him for the whole twenty-day trip across the Galaxy and he had hoped that it would leave him now that his journey was almost over. It had not, but instead it had grown stronger, making him prowling restlessly around the main control room and complain loudly when a minor incident occurred. Murphy, used to these moods, kept out of his way, though he himself was experiencing something of Brady's emotions.

When he had first heard of their trip he had grumbled resentfully at being pulled from the officers' mess, and that bitterness had lasted right up until the takeoff. But on further speculation he realized that Brady would not undertake such a trip unless he had something important on his mind, and Sherman would never have sanctioned it unless he, too, felt reasonably sure of Brady's intentions.

All through that forenoon watch they saw the planet grow

larger. From a dot on the detector screens it grew to a spot that had dimension and from a spot it became a blob that could be perceived with the naked eye through the viewport.

Brady had timed the flight so that they would be able to land on the planet's one spaceport during the early part of the Alkoran day, and he spent nearly half an hour anxiously checking his chronometer against the information he had regarding the planet's rotation and the position of the single space-landing field. By the time he was finished, Alkor loomed before them, a bare fifty thousand miles' off, floating like a giant, nebulous, blue ball against the back cloth of stars. They could see the night line clearly from that altitude and Brady moved the ship slowly in toward that point over which the field should have just passed from night to day.

They descended, lowering their speed, and soon they could make out details of the land below through drifting masses of silver clouds. Through the distance glass Brady searched for the field, but he did not see anything until the cloud was just below them and their height was a bare forty thousand feet.

"There it is, Mister Murphy." His voice was excited and his finger jabbed eagerly in the direction of his glasses.

Murphy turned a bearing glass on the faint brown square that Brady had pointed to and read out the figures.

"That's it right enough, sir," he announced as he finished the check. "The coordinates agree exactly."

Brady nodded. "Take her down, Mister Murphy."

The field opened up before them as they came in for landing. It showed as a great, brown gash in the unbroken green of the surrounding country, and nowhere that he looked could Brady see anything faintly resembling a city or even a large town. He saw small groups of buildings beside the field, and farther away, too, there were signs of habitation. The whole vista of the planet seemed one of

agricultural regularity, save here and there where large, wooded tracts broke the conformity. Occasionally, a thin ribbon of brown indicated a rough road and others, blue and silver in the early morning light of the star, showed where the twisting lines of rivers and streams ran through the land and down to the seas.

Brady left the landing to Murphy and the second-in-command carried it out with slick perfection. There was scarcely a tremor as the giant hull came easily to rest in the geometric center of the field. Murphy lifted her slightly and eased her to one side, leaving the main length of the field ahead of them in case there was need for a quick takeoff.

Brady smiled as he noted the move. "Ready for trouble, Murphy?"

"I don't trust it," replied the second officer. "It's too quiet, sir; anything could happen."

Brady had spotted a small group of single-storied buildings to one side as they landed and he turned the glasses on them seeking signs of habitation. He did not have to search very long. From one of them emerged a single being and, even at that distance, with the aid of the glasses, Brady could see the twin stems of the familiar antennae rising from his forehead. He grunted. "Well, it's the right place, anyhow. Have the starboard hatch opened, Mister Murphy, we'll go out and take a look."

Murphy issued the orders and turned back to look at the being who was crossing the space field towards them. "Certainly looks human enough, sir."

"Uh huh! Well, let's go down and meet him."

"I've arranged a portable translator."

Brady was on the point of asking why, when he realized that, to Murphy, telepathic communication was confined exclusively to the Rihnans.

"Good idea," he replied.

Together they left the control room and made their way

aft to the starboard landing hatch. They reached the top of the ramp to find the Alkoran waiting for them on the ground below. Three crew men formed the rest of the landing party and one of them carried the small, black, plastic box which contained the cerebrotranslator. Brady led the way down to the ground. As he walked the last few feet he wondered idly, "How does one greet such a being in these circumstances? Shake hands maybe? If he knows the gesture, which I doubt."

Then he was looking into the light, green-flecked eyes of the Alkoran. At close quarters the human qualities of his appearance were even more apparent. They stood gazing at each other for a long moment—each, as obviously as the other, revelling in the strangeness of a new experience, then the Alkoran lifted his arm and held his right hand out toward Brady. Automatically he reached and clasped it, his mind a whirl of speculation and surprise while behind him he could hear gasps of excited comment from his companions.

He thought, "How did he know that?" and there came the strong, clearcut reply in his brain. "It is written in your mind, Earthman."

Brady was silent for a moment; he didn't know exactly what to do next.

"You have a translator which we can use," the thought sprang in Brady's mind. "I see from your thoughts that your comrades do not know of our ability to converse otherwise. It would be as well if they did not find out."

"As you wish."

The Alkoran turned and gestured towards the building at the edge of the field, then he walked off ahead of them to lead the way. Brady and Murphy fell in behind him, and the remaining three trailed along in the rear.

The buildings that they approached were a peculiar mixture of the primitive and the ultra-modern. They were built of wood with thatched roofs, and the windows were glassless with thin raffia blinds that could be lowered against

sun or rain, but the whole construction was so beautifully simple and sturdy that even Murphy was forced to remark about it.

"They look as if they could stand for a century or two," he said wonderingly. "Yet I'd take a bet that the first gale would blow them all clear across the planet."

"I would venture a guess that such weather is unknown here," replied Brady. "The very construction of the buildings and the clothes of our guide show that." He gestured to the light, short, toga-like garment worn by their guide.

They were shown to the largest of the eight buildings that composed the group, and through its doorless entrance they passed into the cool, shaded interior. The furnishings were scanty but sufficient, and of a craftsmanship that Brady had never before seen in all his travels. Murphy whistled as he took in the details of a large, carved wooden table standing in the center of the entrance hall. There was workmanship on it which would have made it almost priceless back on Earth.

"If they allow souvenirs I'll take that," he grinned.

The guide took them into a large inner room that was more thickly and even more remarkably furnished than the hall. There were gasps of surprise and admiration from all of them at the splendor of the scene. Yet even while he admired, Brady was puzzled, for there was no evidence of machine work anywhere to be seen—everything was clearly created by hand. But the Centaurans had told him that this was a poor race with little or no technology, and what race in those circumstances could remain poor if they could produce beauty such as this?

His eyes, sweeping the room, came to rest upon the figure of another Alkoran who had risen from an elaborately carved seat to greet them. Brady saw that he was very old. He was not aged as Earthmen, for his face wasn't wrinkled and his form wasn't bent, but his hair was white and his eyes were

bright with a sagacity that only extreme age can give. Brady felt a tight knot of anticipation curl uncomfortably inside his stomach and he sent a probing thought-stream toward the being—and encountered an unshakable barrier which defied him entrance.

One of the crewmen had erected the translator on the floor in front of them and he broke Brady's concentration by handing him the microphone he needed to speak into.

Brady took it, slightly annoyed that he had to use such a superfluous instrument when, had he been alone, he could have accomplished a great deal more without the aid of mechanical contrivances.

He explained briefly the workings of the translator and then handed a second microphone to the Alkoran who received it with a slight bow and a smile.

"We are pleased to welcome our visitors from the stars," he said quietly and ceremoniously. "There will be many interesting things to discuss in the time to come."

"We have many things to ask you," broke in Brady sharply; he was angry at the byplay being forced on him, and he wished with all his heart that he could have left Murphy and the other three behind. To do so, however, would have been to arouse alarm and suspicion.

"We have a custom in our race," began the Alkoran in his light silvery voice, "that when men of different groups or races meet, they meet as one man with another, and they talk as one man to another, and there are no listeners to their most secret conversations.

As he heard the words Brady almost burst out laughing, for it was clear to him that the Alkoran had read his mind and knew he was anxious to get rid of Murphy and the others. He was being presented with a good alibi for doing so.

However, he frowned and considered the point carefully for Murphy's benefit. "You mean," he asked, "your custom is

that you and I should speak alone? That my comrades are not wanted here?"

The Alkoran bowed. "Such is our way and we are unhappy if it is otherwise."

Brady pursed his lips and drew a deep breath as if considering what to do, then he turned to Murphy and said, "If that's the way they want it you'd better go back aboard and wait for me."

"Like hell I will," rejoined Murphy angrily. "What happens to you if it's a trap?"

"I doubt very much if it is, Mister Murphy," said Brady mildly. "And even if it is I should imagine you have enough power at your disposal on board to reap ample revenge."

Murphy eyed his superior angrily. "Remember that Rihnan ship sir? That was easy too, and look at the trouble you got into."

"I do not anticipate any this time," Brady insisted. "I order you to await my return on board the ship. If I am not back in three hours you have my permission to take any measures you think necessary."

Murphy snorted angrily, but he saluted in acquiescence.

XVII

A MINUTE later Brady was alone with the Alkoran and the now useless translator.

"Sit down, Stephen Brady," the thought sprang strongly to his mind, and he felt again the mental power that had first aroused his curiosity on Tekron.

"You have come a long way for truth. May your curiosity be satisfied."

Brady seated himself opposite the being and responded

quickly, "There are many puzzles I wish to solve and many questions that I must ask to solve them."

"Gently, Brady, gently." The thoughts were mild and slightly amused but they had a strength which gave Brady the impression that, despite his own superiority to the Rihnans, he was an infant beside this frail Alkoran.

"I have first to tell you a story," continued the being. "It is a story which will answer most of your questions before you can ask them, and it is one you will have to know before you leave here."

"But—"

"Your questions will keep," came the firm insistence, and reluctantly he subsided to hear what the Alkoran had to say.

"There is much that you will wish to know, but it must be told from the very beginning in order that you may understand completely. You must know first that many millions of years ago, long before the birth of homo sapiens, there was a planet that was very new and it revolved around a star which was very young. The planet was the only offspring of the star and it was much the same as a million other planets throughout the Galaxy except for one vital flaw. It had few mineral deposits.

"The planet produced, in due course, a race that was like those that had evolved on the other planets, except for things. One was that it could not develop along the usual physical lines because the planet could not provide it with the minerals and implements necessary for such development. It reached the crucial point where it could either go forward along a certain path, or it could regress and perish through sheer inertia. Every race that has ever existed has progressed because it was challenged and because of an innate curiosity without which any form of civilization is doomed. All races exist and progress until they reach a height which they are unable to scale, and then they die.

"The race of which I tell—"

"The Alkora," interrupted Brady grimly.

There was a hint of amusement at the back of his mind, and the being responded, "If you will, then, the Alkora reached that height against which they could have perished, and the realm of physical things closed to them. There entered the second factor. The Alkora came upon the rarest gift in the Universe, the gift that decides who shall live and who shall perish, for they discovered how to use their minds. It was a long time in developing, and came during that long period when they were trying to find other answers to their physical limitations. At first they did not realize exactly how important it was, but when they did their mental control was complete.

"Can you imagine the handicap under which any race must labor which evolves upon a planet that can offer the flowers and fruits of the field, but not the metals or the elements which are the basis of technical science? It is not an easy thing to overcome such handicaps. But it was done, and at last there lived upon this planet a race whose physical and mechanical achievements were a source of scorn in the Galaxy and yet whose mental mastery was complete."

"Including teleportation," put in Brady, aware as he did so that his thoughts were tinged with irony.

He felt a flicker of surprise within the Alkora's mind. "We did not realize that you were aware of that?"

"That is because of your lack of experience of the physical world," replied Brady. "I spotted your two representatives on Ortan."

The other nodded.

"But they shouldn't have been on Ortan."

"I do not understand."

"The planet had been under strict security regulations for weeks, and no passenger vessels from anywhere in the Galaxy except Earth were allowed within a light-year of the place. There was no way your two friends could have got to

Ortan unless they had come from Earth, where the security arrangements are equally severe. That left only one other possibility—teleportation.”

“And what else do you think?” The question was thoughtful and almost rhetorical.

“You sent them there to bring me here.”

Brady’s mind was ice-cold now, and he knew with certainty that his suspicions all along had been well founded. The very silence of the Alkoran seemed to give assent.

“And do you know why we wanted you to come here?”

“No, that is something I have not been able to decide.”

“Then listen to the rest of the story.” The thought-stream was mild and untroubled once again. “As you say, we developed, among other things, teleportation. Since we had no metals to build ships or aircraft we had to find other, simpler methods of transport than domesticated animals, and we found them within our minds. From that point we solved not only our local transportation difficulties but another which, under the technical limitations, would have been denied us for eternity. We reached the stars.

“You have known, as we did, the thrill and triumph of that achievement. But the triumph did not last long, for we found on a planet in another system a dying race whom we could not help, and another a race that was on the way up from the slime but which would slide back into it despite all our efforts to prevent it. For more than a million years we roamed the Galaxy watching races rise and fall, failing because there was no one to help them. We could not, for we had no technology and they had not the mind that could develop as we had done. We sought the answer in a thousand star systems and on a million planets, and everywhere it was the same: a race evolved and grew to maturity, reached the final height it could not clear, and then sank back to die in its own ashes.”

The thought-stream paused and Brady had an impression

of infinite sadness. Through his own brain flowed the story of the Alkora and at the back of the story a wild suspicion he dared not recognize because it was too awful.

"Over a million years ago we visited the system known to you as Fomalhaut and there, on one of the hundred planets in the group, we found a race on the brink of space travel just as so many races had been before it, but for them there was a difference. There the problem was solved. The stars were within reach because for once the technical problems had been solved by mechanical methods rather than the mental powers we had used so many thousands of years before. This race you know as the Rihnans.

"In them we found what we had been looking for: a race with mental power capable of developing as ours had and of combining that development with the technical ability to help all other races who, alone, would perish. We showed them the way to Galactic conquest, we guided them in the path they should walk, and we felt that our task was ended, for here was a race that could do what we could not, a race who could both think and act.

"It was a long time before we discovered our mistake, before we realized that the Rihnans had gone as far as they would ever go. They had reached the limit of their mental powers and without our help they would have perished as had all the others. We were forced into the position of ruling the Galaxy by proxy, and to do this we had to use our own thoughts impressed upon the Rihnan minds. But they never suspected for an instant that their continued progress was the result of anything but their own efforts and in that factor lay our greatest danger. We dared not let them suspect.

"The greatest threat to our plans came when their home planet was destroyed by a natural phenomenon. When that happened, the Rihnans nearly died, for as a race they lost the will to carry on, and without us they would have vanished

from the scene. We could have let them go, but who would take their place? Without them the Galaxy would have reverted to its former savagery, for there would have been no guiding force to keep it on the path. It would have reverted to the ages when there were only dying races upon dying planets and, in time, the Universe would have been a dead thing, and perhaps we should have been alone.

"You know how the Rihnnans recovered? Yes, I see that you do. All the ingenuity they displayed was implanted by us. We had to do their thinking for them, in order that they, and the rest of the Galaxy might survive. We had to give them confidence, and for half a million years we have watched over them and guided them. In all that time we have sought a race who could take their place and hold the Galaxy without any aid from us, and until now all our efforts have been in vain. We cultivated within the Rihnan mind the pattern whereby new races could be tested and tried, in the hope that one of them would be able to overcome the obstacles which we, through the Rihnnans, placed in their path."

The Alkoran paused in his recital, and his deep wise eyes looked solemnly across at Brady who stirred uneasily. He wanted desperately not to believe what he knew must be true. He would have given his life for its untruth, but there was no denying the evidence.

He closed his eyes. "Go on." He was becoming dulled to the pain.

"I see in your mind that you already guess the answer, Earthman, and yet you will yourself not to believe it. Through the Rihnnans we encouraged the system whereby races of seeming promise were helped over the barrier which threatened their development and their very life. In most cases the barrier was that of space travel; either they had no satellite to encourage them, or they were not capable of the technological advancement. We hoped that by giving them

the secret of the space-drive which the Rihnans had discovered, they would be able to take up the task the Rihnans had begun. None of them ever did. There were mysteries they were incapable of solving, and they had to be led. Once having been led they were dependent on our guidance."

"You mean that you gave the secret of space travel to every race that had developed far enough to understand it?" asked Brady.

"That is so; we gave secretly that which we learned from the Rihnan scientists, and none realized that it was a gift. We hoped that they would be able to prove their fitness to rule by forcing their way into the Galaxy, and by defeating everything which we, through the Rihnans, could put against them. On every occasion they failed; they were defeated and became passive members of the Empire we had created."

There was another pause as Brady's spinning brain tried to assimilate the information. It explained so much: it explained why every single race had produced the space drive in exactly the same way despite vast differences of physical and cultural development, it explained so many things and answered so many questions which had not been asked, for the information had come before the questions could be formulated. He asked flatly, "You gave us the secret of space flight?"

"No, not you. We thought you would not be ready for another millenium at least. We judged from the reports our travellers brought about the release of atomic power on several of your continents hundreds of years ago, that you would move rapidly along the path of self-destruction, as so many others have done before you. We thought that you would not recover from that calamity for a thousand years at least. When we heard that you had broken free from your own system we could not believe it; we knew of every move that you made against the Centaurans, and through the Rihnans we countered them to the best of our ability." There

was a hint of mild amusement in the alien thought-stream. "No doubt you thought some of the tactics used were ridiculous, but you must remember we had no experience and neither had the Rihnans.

"The entry of that first ship into the Centauran system was not known to us until too late, and when we heard of it we estimated that your next move would be an all-out attack by you against the Centaurans. When we heard that your fleets had taken complete control of the Centauran system without any opposition we knew that what we had hoped for so long had come to pass, and that another race had entered the Galaxy which was young and strong and willing to assume the burden which, without our help, the Rihnans would have laid down long ago."

There was an impression of great gratitude in Brady's mind, an impression which rose even above the raging tumult of his own thoughts.

The Alkoran continued: "Now we can relax our vigil, for your people are keen and eager to follow where the Rihnans have led, and they have the mind and will to rise to heights which the Rihnans could not even conceive."

"Then we shall be ruling the Galaxy because you allow us to?" asked Brady. He did not wait for an answer, but went straight on: "My race is a proud one, and one that will not appreciate the truth of things as you have explained it to me. They are hotheaded, and they will not like to think that they are in control on those terms. Can you guess their reaction when I tell them all this?"

He waited quietly, knowing that the Alkoran would see the picture in his mind far better than his own senses could convey it, and he felt the alien probing as he searched his mind for the picture he wished to transmit.

"Yes, I see it," replied the Alkoran. "In their rage they would come here and destroy this planet and my race. Yes, I see the picture you are drawing, but I do not think that

it will happen that way. There is a factor you have not thought of, and one which we could not anticipate, although we could counter it when we knew of it."

Brady felt an uneasiness stirring beneath the anger he felt, for there was an easy confidence in the alien thought-stream which disturbed him. He knew in his heart that his anger was unjustified, but he could not help it.

The Alkoran continued. "We heard that an Earthman had been captured by the Rihnans and brought to Tekron and, since we were anxious to see what action they would take, we sent one of our people to find out. When he arrived he found you. Also he found, to his great astonishment, that you had somehow developed mental faculties which could be harmful to your people if they were let loose among them before they were ready to receive such advanced knowledge. By probing your brain from a distance, he found out how it had been accomplished and he returned to report the phenomenon. We were faced with a factor which had not been anticipated.

"You understand that the cultural lag following knowledge prematurely gained can be extremely harmful, even catastrophic to a people's development. Such is the case with you, for we realize that, once on the track, your scientists will be able to duplicate artificially the means by which you gained access to your inner mind. Our long experience has shown us the harm that would result.

"Our representative returned with instructions on how to handle you, and his first task was to arouse your curiosity about us. That he did by allowing you a flash of his mental capabilities. Next we arranged by simple mental control that you would be afraid to tell any but certain high officials about your new mental status, and lastly we had to lure you to this planet so that the whole story could be told to you and steps taken to offset the unfortunate occurrence on Tekron."

Brady reluctantly realized that all this was true. The two Alkorans on Ortan had been sent to give him the suspicions he had about their method of travel. He had been guided all along by fixed, carefully laid clues in order that he would think of them as accidental. He raised his head and looked at the Alkoran with angry eyes.

"Yes," came the gentle answer, "all that is as you surmise. The only bit of proof there was about our real position in the Universe lay within your brain, and that proof would never have been found if we had not planted it there for the express intention of bringing you here to Alkora. We had to take a risk but the results have justified it."

Brady clenched his fists in sudden emotion. "And you thought that by meeting me face to face and explaining all this to me you could stop me from telling what I know and from using the new powers I have gained, is that it?"

"No. If we did that we should be failing in our duty to the rest of the Galaxy, for some time in the future something would happen to make you reveal your powers to others of your race, and it might well prove disastrous if such a danger was allowed to continue.

"We called you for two reasons: one is as you have guessed, to tell you a story. The other was to remove from you the means by which you might endanger the Galaxy."

Brady shot to his feet like an uncoiled spring, his hand moving with angry swiftness to the regulation pistol which hung at his hip.

"If you think you're going to operate on me—" he snarled with his emotion.

"Gently, Brady, gently," came the easy, peaceful reply. "We will do you no harm—we have done you no harm."

"Done?" Brady seized on the word with horror.

The other nodded gently. "While we were conversing I took the measures necessary to re-establish the mental blocks which are a normal part of your makeup. There is

now no proof of anything that has happened to you and I do not think you will find a way back toward that former state."

"But I can still see into your mind?"

"So you could into the first Rihnans' that you met but it was because the power was on their side. Now it is on mine, but unless I wish it you cannot see within my mind any more than you will be able to see within the minds of the Rihnans in the future."

Brady sat still as the horror of the situation impressed him. It was as the Alkoran had said: no one on Earth would believe his story without proof and the proof that had rested in his mind had been taken from him. Even if some credence were given to his story it would only need a little mental pressure in the right places to make sure that the idea was ridiculed before it could become embarrassing.

Brady felt tired suddenly, and lost. The trip he had made was useless, for all the knowledge he had could not be used and he knew that it would haunt him for the rest of his days. The thought that his race was ruling the Galaxy by the grace of a few million carpenters and farmers was more than he could bear. He began to laugh weakly and rather hysterically as the reaction set in.

The alien thought-stream came gently to him as he sat hunched and shattered in his seat. "This feeling will pass in time, Brady. If I could have eased the shock I would have done so. You must take heart from the fact that, alone of all your race, you know the truth. In that knowledge lies power, for in due time you will become one of the great men of your race, and then you will have need of help from us. Through us you will be able to lead your people to greater heights than we could ever take them without their knowledge, for you will know just what will be acceptable to them. You will be able to ask our help freely, and freely it

will be given, not without your knowledge as it was with the Rihnans, but in a spirit of cooperation and friendliness.

"When this moment has mellowed with time, you will see that we have been right to act as we have done in removing such a burden of responsibility from you, for your race is not yet ready for the power you were capable of giving them. Perhaps then you will come back and we can talk in peace of more pleasant things, and there will be no bitterness in your heart.

"We are passing on a task which we have been ill-suited to perform, and we are passing it to a race who, without help, can become the greatest force the Universe has ever known. When that moment comes, as come it will, we shall see the justification of all our efforts and all our follies. Go now, Brady, but return in peace when you so desire."

Brady hardly heard the last thoughts as he rose, shaken, from his seat and walked unseeingly toward the door. As he reached the outer entrance to the building the blinding rays of the alien sun struck his face, and he screwed up his eyes in their sockets against the glare. At the back of his mind there echoed, "Farewell, Brady, until we meet again," but it was like a whisper that is lost in the wind, and afterward he could not be certain that he had really felt it.

He leaned against the side of the door and gradually, through the brilliance, he made out the bulk of the ship waiting for him, its glinting, grey hull a sharp reminder of the realities which lay before him.

He knew without any doubt that what the Alkoran had told him was true, and he knew also, that the hardest part of Man's destiny lay before him, and not behind him, as so many had thought after the Grand Action. He felt a choking lump in his throat, and was aware, with sudden horror, that there were tears on his cheeks. He brushed them angrily aside, and as he did so, he could see the figure

of Murphy, alone, at the top of the landing ramp. As he watched it started to descend and come toward him, slowly at first, and then running hard. He had been seen.

He walked slowly across the field toward the hurrying figure, and his shadow preceded him across the brown earth. He did not feel like the conqueror of the Galaxy.