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**WORLDS OF**



# **SCIENCE FICTION**

**AUGUST, 1965**

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**ISSUE 93**

**ALL NEW  
STORIES**

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# GROWING PAINS — AND PLEASURES

There was a time when we thought we would get *Skylark DuQuesne* into three installments. Doc Smith, though, is a man who thinks on a huge scale. Kiloparsecs are only short jaunts for the Skylarkers, and kilowords are just enough room to get started in for the stories of their adventures. We gave up the three-installment idea early.

Then we were pretty sure we'd be able to do it in four. But other stories kept coming in. A long one by Van Vogt and Schmitz that we wanted to bring you right away; shorter ones by a half dozen other writers; the regular features . . . anyway, we found ourselves out of room. So this third installment of *Skylark DuQuesne* isn't the last. Neither is next month's fourth installment. It will take five in all, concluding in our October issue. (Positively!)

This was frankly a little embarrassing to us, and it caused us to do a lot of thinking and reappraising of some things we had been taking for granted about our production procedures. In fact, it started in train a pretty complex series of events . . . but, we think you will agree, one with a happy ending.

You see, when you come right down to it, a hundred and thirty-two pages isn't really enough space for a magazine like *If*.

We do what we can, of course. We managed to get more words into

*If* than you'll find in nearly any other magazine of its size—by using a more compact type, by running very little advertising matter, by a variety of stratagems. Still and all, we've always felt a little cramped.

This has made an editorial problem that we've never been quite confident of solving. It's a classic dilemma. On the one hand, we think a magazine should have a variety of stories in it—and you can't have a variety unless you print at least half a dozen stories, preferably more than that. On the other hand it seems to be the nature of the beast that the longer sf stories are usually more fun to read than the short ones. (Oh, sure, there are honorable exceptions. But just for fun, make your own list of the twenty best science-fiction stories you've ever read. See how many run novelette length or longer.)

This problem has been with us for years—relieved a little bit when we changed format, because the new type meant a little extra wordage; relieved again when we went monthly, because that made it easier to use serials—but still a problem.

However, we think we've licked it now.

Starting next month, there will be thirty-two more pages in *If*. Enough to run about two extra novelettes—or four or five short stories—or an additional complete short novel—or an extra installment

of a serial. That is in addition to what we've been running all along, of course—so that if a typical issue has contained six or seven stories, about half of them novelettes or serial installments or other long pieces, the issue from now on will contain all of those things *plus* what we can get into the thirty-two extra pages. One of the minor side-effects, for instance, will probably be that *Hue & Cry* will show up in every issue, instead of being squeezed out from time to time when the story pressure gets too heavy. But the principal effect will be that we will have room to give you more stories in each issue—which we think will mean a better balance of stories.

Now, this is all stop-press news, as this editorial is written. In fact, the decision was made just 48 hours ago, and we spent all day yesterday redesigning our September cover, titles and so on to make it all possible. (Once the publisher gave us the go-ahead we didn't want to waste any time putting it into effect!) Some things we didn't have time to do. For example, for one reason and another it was impossible to reschedule Doc Smith's *Skylark* any more, so it will still run to five parts, concluding in October. But we did have time to send out a couple of additional novelettes—stories that you would have had to wait at least another month for otherwise; and probably, for make-up reasons, considerably longer than that.

And, oh, yes, one thing more.

The more case-hardened and frequently shot-over among our readers are already rattling coins in their pockets, thinking grim thoughts about inflation and rising

prices, and wondering just what all this is leading up to. Increasing the price to a dollar a copy, maybe?

Matter of fact, we aren't increasing it at all. 32 more pages . . . which means adding 25% to the body of the magazine and actually somewhat more than that to its story contents . . . and the price stays right where it is.

Now, *there's* a fantastic story for you!

But it's true. Pick up a copy next month and see for yourself.

**I**ncidentally, filling the new bigger *If* will mean we'll have to be buying a couple hundred thousand extra words every year, so this is as good a time as any to mention again that we are permanently on the lookout for good new stories and good new writers. As you old-timers know, for several years now we have been publishing at least one "First" story in each issue—by a writer never previously published. It isn't a contest. The stories are bought at our regular rates, and we're perfectly willing to publish more than one an issue if we get enough good ones. The only "rules" are those that apply to writing stories for any magazine anywhere: Stories must be original; they must be typed, double-spaced on white paper; they must come with stamped, self-addressed return envelope . . . and they must be good enough to publish! (All you have to worry about is competing with Robert A. Heinlein, A. E. Van Vogt, Hal Clement, Keith Laumer, Poul Anderson, Edward E. Smith, Fritz Leiber and a few others like that. But—after all, that's exactly how they started too) —THE EDITOR



# TRICK or

**KEITH LAUMER**



# TREATY

**The conquering Krultch had little to fear from Retief's outcast band of mountebanks — so, fearlessly, they lost their empire!**

A large green-yolked egg splattered across the flexglas panel as it slammed behind Retief. Across the long, narrow lobby, under a glare-sign reading HOSTELRY RITZ-KRUDLU, the Gaspierre room clerk looked up, then came quickly around the counter, long-bodied, short-legged, an expression as of one detecting a bad odor on his flattened, leathery-looking face. He spread six of the eight arms attached to his narrow shoulders like a set of measuring spoons, twitching the other two in a cramped shrug.

"The hotel, he is fill!" he wheezed. "To some other house you convey your custom, yes?"

"Stand fast," Retief said to the four Terrans who had preceded him through the door. "Hello, Strupp," he nodded to the agitated clerk. "These are friends of mine. See if you can't find them a room."

"As I comment but now, the rooms, he is occupy!" Strupp pointed to the door. "Kindly facilities provide by management to place selves back outside use!"

A narrow panel behind the registration desk popped open; a second Gaspierre slid through, took in the situation, emitted a sharp hiss. Strupp whirled, his arms semaphoring an unreadable message.

"Never mind that, Strupp," the newcomer snapped in accentless Terran. He took out a strip of patterned cloth, mopped under the breathing orifices set in the sides of his neck, looked at the group of Terrans, and then back at Retief. "Ah, something I can do for you, Mr. Retief?"

"Evening, Hrooze," Retief said. "Permit me to introduce Mr. Julius Mulvihill, Miss Suzette La Flamme, Wee Willie and Professor Fate, just in from out-system. There seems to be a room shortage in town. I thought perhaps you could accommodate them."

Hrooze eyed the door through which the Terrans had entered, twitched his nictating eyelids in a nervous gesture.

"You know the situation here, Retief!" he said. "I have nothing against Terries personally, of course, but if I rent to these people—"

"I was thinking you might fix them up with free rooms, just as a sort of good-will gesture."

"If we these Terries to the Ritz-Krudlu admit, the repercussions political out of business us will put!" Strupp expostulated.

"The next ship out is two days from now," Retief said. "They need a place to stay until then."

Hrooze looked at Retief, mopped his neck again. "I owe you a favor, Retief," he said. "Two days, though, that's all!"

"But—" Strupp began.

"Silence!" Hrooze sneezed. "Put them in twelve-oh-three and four!"

He drew Retief aside as a small bell-hop in a brass-studded harness began loading baggage on his back.

"How does it look?" he inquired. "Any hope of getting that squadron of Peace Enforcers to stand by out-system?"

"I'm afraid not; Sector HQ seems to feel that might be interpreted by the Krultch as a war-like gesture."



"Certainly it would! That's exactly what the Krultch can understand —"

"Ambassador Sheepshorn has great faith in the power of words," Retief said soothingly. "He has a reputation as a great verbal karate expert; the Genghis Khan of the conference table."

"But what if you lose? The cabinet votes on the Krultch treaty tomorrow! If it's signed, Gaspierre will be nothing but a fueling station for the Krultch battle fleet! And you Terries will end up slaves!"

"A sad end for a great oral athlete," Retief said. "Let's hope he's in good form tomorrow."

In the shabby room on the twelfth level, Retief tossed a thick plastic coin to the baggage slave, who departed emitting the thin squeaking that substituted in his species for a jaunty whistle. Mulvihill, a huge man with a handlebar mustache, looked around, plumped his vast, bulging suitcase to the thin carpet, and mopped at the purple-fruit stain across his red plastiweve jacket.

"I'd like to get my hands on the Gasper that threw that," he growled in a bullfrog voice.

"That's a mean crowd out there," said Miss La Flamme, a shapely redhead with a tattoo on her left biceps. "It was sure a break for us the Ambassador changed his mind about helping us out. From the look the old sourpuss gave me when I kind of bumped up against him, I figured he had ground glass where his red corpuscles ought to be."

"I got a sneaking hunch Mr. Retief swung this deal on his own, Suzie," the big man said. "The Ambassador's got bigger things on his mind than out-of-work variety acts."

"This is the first time the Marvelous Merivales have ever been flat out of luck on tour," commented a whiskery little man no more than three feet tall, dressed in an old-fashioned frock coat and a checkered vest, in a voice like the yap of a Pekinese. "How come we got to get mixed up in politics?"

"Shut up, Willie," the big man said. "It's not Mr. Retief's fault we came here."

"Yeah," the midget conceded. "I guess you fellows in the CDT got it kind of rough too, trying to pry the Gaspers outa the Krultch's hip pocket. Boy, I wish I could see the show tomorrow when the Terry Ambassador and the Krultch brass slug it out to see whose side the Gaspers'll be neutral on."

"Neutral, ha!" the tall, cadaverous individual looming behind Wee Willie snorted. "I caught a glimpse of that ferocious war vessel at the port, openly flying the Krultch battle-flag! It's an open breach of inter-world custom —"

"Hey, Professor, leave the speeches to the CDT," the girl said.

"Without free use of Gaspierre ports, the Krultch plans for expansion through the Gloob cluster would come to naught. A firm stand —"

"Might get 'em blasted right off the planet," the big man growled. "The Krultch play for keeps."

"And the Gaspers aim to be on

the winning side," the midget piped. "And all the smart money is on the Krultch battlewagon to put up the best argument."

"Terries are fair game around here, it looks like, Mr. Retief," Mulvihill said. "You better watch yourself going back."

Retief nodded. "Stay close to your rooms; if the vote goes against us tomorrow, we may all be looking for a quick way home."

## II

Outside on the narrow elevated walkway that linked the gray slab-like structures of the city, thin-featured Gaspierre natives shot wary looks at Retief, some skirting him widely, others jostling him as they crowded past. It was a short walk to the building where the Terrestrial delegation occupied a suite. As Retief neared it, a pair of Krultch sailors emerged from a shop, turned in his direction. They were short-coupled centauroid quadrupeds, with deep, narrow chests, snouted faces with businesslike jaws and fringe beards, dressed in the red-striped livery of the Krultch Navy, complete with side-arms and short swagger sticks.

Retief altered course to the right to give them passing room; they saw him, nudged each other, and spaced themselves to block the walk. Retief came on without slowing, started between them. The Krultch closed ranks. Retief stepped back started around the sailor on the left. The creature sidled, still blocking his path.

"Oh-hoh, Terry loose in street," he said in a voice like sand in a gear-box. "You lost, Terry?"

The other Krultch crowded Retief against the rail. "Where you from, Terry? What you do—?"

Without warning, Retief slammed a solid kick to the shin of the Krultch before him, simultaneously wrenched the stick from the alien's grip, cracked it down sharply across the wrist of the other sailor as he went for his gun. The weapon clattered, skidded off the walk and was gone. The one whom Retief had kicked was hopping on three legs, making muffled sounds of agony. Retief stepped quickly to him, jerked his gun from its holster, aimed it negligently at the other Krultch.

"Better get your buddy back to the ship and have that leg looked at," he said. "I think I broke it."

A ring of gaping Gaspierre had gathered, choking the walk. Retief thrust the pistol into his pocket, turned his back on the Krultch, pushed through the locals. A large course-hided Gaspierre policeman made as if to block his way; Retief rammed an elbow in his side, chopped him across the side of the neck as he doubled up, thrust him aside and kept going. A mutter was rising from the crowd behind him.

The Embassy was just ahead now. Retief turned off toward the entry; two yellow-uniformed Gaspierre moved into sight under the marquee, eyed him as he came up.

"Terran, have you not heard of

the curfew?" one demanded in shrill but accurate Terran.

"Can't say that I have," Retief replied. "There wasn't any, an hour ago."

"There is now!" the other snapped. "You Terries are not popular here. If you insist in inflaming the populace by walking abroad, we cannot be responsible for your safety—" he broke off as he saw the Krultch pistol protruding from Retief's pocket.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded in Gaspieran, then switched to pidgin Terran: "Where you-fella catch um bang-bang?"

"A couple of lads were playing with it in the street," Retief said in the local dialect. "I took it away from them before someone got hurt." He started past them.

"Hold on there," the policeman snapped. "We're not finished with you yet, fellow. We'll tell you when you can go. Now..." He folded his upper elbows. "You're to go to your quarters at once. In view of the tense interplanetary situation, you Terries are to remain inside until further notice. I have my men posted on all approaches to, ah, provide protection."

"You're putting a diplomatic mission under arrest?" Retief inquired mildly.

"I wouldn't call it that. Let's just say that it wouldn't be safe for foreigners to venture abroad."

"Threats too?"

"This measure is necessary in order to prevent unfortunate incidents!"

"How about the Krultch? They're

foreigners; are you locking them in their bedrooms?"

"The Krultch are old and valued friends of the Gaspierre," the police captain said stiffly. "We—"

"I know; ever since they set an armed patrol just outside Gaspieran atmosphere, you've developed a vast affection for them. Of course, their purchasing missions help too."

The captain smirked. "We Gaspierre are nothing if not practical." He held out his claw-like two-fingered hand. "You will now give me the weapon."

Retief handed it over silently.

"Come; I will escort you to your room," the cop said.

Retief nodded complacently, followed the Gaspierre through the entry cubicle and into the lift.

"I'm glad you've decided to be reasonable," the cop said. "After all, if you Terries *should* convince the cabinet, it will be much nicer all around if there have been no incidents."

"How true," Retief murmured.

He left the car at the 20th floor.

"Don't forget, now," the cop said, watching Retief key his door. "Just stay inside and all will yet be well." He signalled to a policeman standing a few yards along the corridor.

"Keep an eye on the door, Klosta."

Inside, Retief picked up the phone, dialed the Ambassador's room number. There was a dry buzz, no answer. He looked around the room. There was a tall, narrow window set in the wall opposite the

door with a hinged section that swung outward. Retief opened it, leaned out, looked down at the dizzying stretch of blank facade that dropped sheer to the upper walkway seventy yards below. Above, the wall extended up twenty feet to an overhanging cornice. He went to the closet, yanked a blanket from the shelf, ripped it in four wide strips, knotted them together, and tied one end to a chair which he braced below the window.

Retief swung his legs outside the window, grasped the blanket-rope, and slid down.

The window at the next level was closed and shuttered. Retief braced himself on the sill, delivered a sharp kick to the panel; it shattered with an explosive sound. He dropped lower, reached through, released the catch, pulled the window wide, knocked the shutter aside, and scrambled through into a darkened room.

"Who's there?" a sharp voice barked. A tall, lean man in a ruffled shirt with an unknotted string tie hanging down the front gaped at Retief from the inner room.

"Retief! How did you get here? I understood that none of the staff were to be permitted—that is, I agreed that protective custody—er, it seems..."

"The whole staff is bottled up here in the building. Mr. Ambassador. I'd guess they mean to keep us here until after the Cabinet meeting. It appears the Krultch have the fix in."

"Nonsense! I have a firm commitment from the Minister that no final commitment will be made until we've been heard—"

"Meanwhile, we're under house arrest—just to be sure we don't have an opportunity to bring any of the cabinet around to our side."

"Are you suggesting that I've permitted illegal measures to be taken without a protest?" Ambassador Sheepshorn fixed Retief with a piercing gaze which wilted, and slid aside. "The place was alive with armed gendarmes," he sighed. "What could I do?"

"A few shrill cries of outrage might have helped," Retief pointed out. "It's not too late. A fast visit to the Foreign Office—"

"Are you out of your mind? Have you observed the temper of the populace? We'd be torn to shreds!"

Retief nodded. "Quite possibly; but what do you think our chances are tomorrow, after the Gaspierre conclude a treaty with the Krultch?"

Sheepshorn made two tries, then swallowed hard. "Surely, Retief, you don't—"

"I'm afraid I do," Retief said. "The Krultch need a vivid symbol of their importance—and they'd also like to involve the Gaspierre in their skulduggery, just to insure their loyalty. Packing a clutch of Terry diplomats off to the ice mines would do both jobs."

"A great pity," the Ambassador sighed. "And only nine months to go till my retirement."

"I'll have to be going now," Retief said. "There may be a posse of annoyed police along at any mo-

ment, and I'd hate to make it too easy for them."

"Police? You mean they're not even waiting until after the Cabinet's decision?"

"Oh, this is just a personal matter; I damaged some Krultch Naval property and gave a Gaspierre cop a pain in the neck."

"I've warned you about your personality, Retief," Sheepshorn admonished. "I suggest you give yourself up, and ask for clemency; with luck, you'll get to go along to the mines with the rest of us. I'll personally put in a good word!"

"That would interfere with my plans, I'm afraid," Retief said. He went to the door. "I'll try to be back before the Gaspierre do anything irrevocable. Meanwhile, hold the fort here. If they come for you, quote regulations at them; I'm sure they'll find that discouraging."

"Plans? Retief, I positively forbid you to —"

Retief stepped through the door and closed it behind him, cutting off the flow of Ambassadorial wisdom. A flat policeman, posted a few feet along the corridor came to the alert.

"All right, you can go home now," Retief said in brisk Gaspierran. "The chief changed his mind; he decided violating a Terran Embassy's quarters was just asking for trouble. After all, the Krultch haven't won yet."

The cop stared at him, then nodded. "I wondered if this wasn't kind of getting the rickshaw before the coolie..." he hesitated. "But what do *you* know about it?"

"I just had a nice chat with the captain, one floor up."

"Well, if he let you come down here, I guess it's all right."

"If you hurry, you can make it back to the barracks before the evening rush begins." Retief waved airily and strolled away along the corridor.

### III

Back at ground level, Retief went along a narrow service passage leading to the rear of the building, stepped out into a deserted-looking courtyard. There was another door across the way. He went to it, followed another hall to a street exit. There were no cops in sight. He took the sparsely peopled lower walkway, set off at a brisk walk.

Ten minutes later, Retief surveyed the approaches to the Hostelry Ritz-Krudlu from the shelter of an inter-level connecting stair. There was a surging crowd of Gaspierre blocking the walkway, with a scattering of yellow police uniforms patrolling the edge of the mob. Placards lettered TERRY GO HOME and KEEP GASPIERRE BROWN bobbed above the sea of flattened heads. Off to one side, a heavily braided Krultch officer stood with a pair of age-tarnished locals, looking on approvingly.

Retief retraced his steps to the debris-littered ground level twenty feet below the walkway, found an eighteen-inch wide airspace leading back between buildings. He inched along it, came to a door, found it



locked. Four doors later, a latch yielded to his touch.

He stepped inside, made out the dim outlines of an empty storage room. The door across the room was locked. Retief stepped back, slammed a kick against it at latch level; it bounced wide.

After a moment's wait for the sound of an alarm which failed to materialize, Retief moved off along the passage, found a rubbish-heaped stair. He clambered over the debris, and started up.

At the twelfth level, he emerged into the corridor. There was no one in sight. He went quickly along to the door numbered 1203, tapped lightly. There was a faint sound from inside; then a bass voice rumbled, "Who's there?"

"Retief. Open up before the house dick spots me."

Bolts clattered and the door swung wide; Julius Mulvihill's mustached face appeared; he seized Retief's hand and pumped it.

"Cripes, Mr. Retief, we were worried about you. Right after you left, old Hrooze called up here and said there was a riot starting up!"

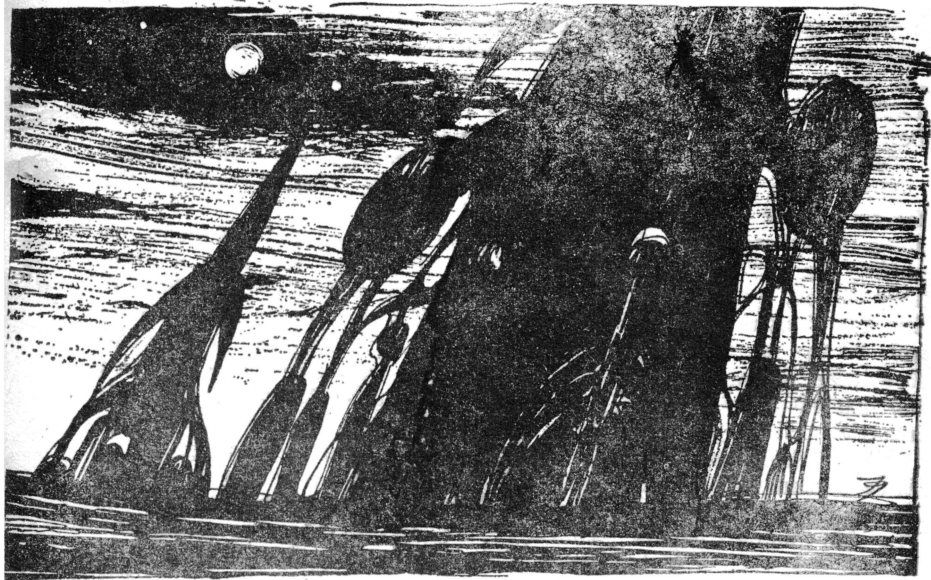
"Nothing serious; just a few enthusiasts out front putting on a show for the Krultch."

"What's happened?" Wee Willie chirped, coming in from the next room with lather on his chin. "They throwing us out already?"

"No, you'll be safe enough right here. But I need your help."

The big man nodded, flexed his hands.

Suzette La Flamme thrust a drink



into Retief's hand. "Sit down and tell us about it."

"Glad you came to us, Retief," Wee Willie piped.

Retief took the offered chair, sampled the drink, then outlined the situation.

"What I have in mind could be dangerous," he finished.

"What ain't?" Willie demanded.

"It calls for a delicate touch and some fancy footwork," Retief added.

The professor cleared his throat. "I am not without a certain dexterity —" he started.

"Let him finish," the redhead said.

"And I'm not even sure it's possible," Retief stated.

The big man looked at the others. "There's a lot of things that look impossible — but the Marvelous

Merivales do 'em anyway. That's what's made our act a wow on a hundred and twelve planets."

The girl tossed her red hair. "The way it looks, Mr. Retief, if somebody doesn't do something, by this time tomorrow this is going to be mighty unhealthy territory for Terries."

"The ones the mob don't get will be chained to an oar in a Krutch battle-wagon," Willie piped.

"With the Mission pinned down in their quarters, the initiative appears to rest with us," Professor Fate intoned. The others nodded.

"If you're all agreed then," Retief said, "here's what I have in mind . . ."

The corridor was empty when Retief emerged, followed by the four Terrans.

"How are we going to get out past that crowd out front?" Mulvihill inquired. "I've got a feeling they're ready for something stronger than slogans."

"We'll try the back way."

There was a sudden hubbub from the far end of the corridor; half a dozen Gaspierre burst into view, puffing hard from a fast climb. They hissed, pointed, and started for the Terrans at a short-legged trot. At the same moment, a door flew wide at the opposite end of the hallway; more locals popped into view, closed in.

"Looks like a neck-tie party," Wee Willie barked. "Go get 'em, Julie!" He put his head down and charged. The on-coming natives slowed, skipped aside. One, a trifle slow, bounced against the wall as the midget rammed him at knee level. The others whirled, grabbing at Wee Willie as he skidded to a halt. Mulvihill roared, took three giant steps, caught two Gaspierre by the backs of their leathery necks, lifted them and tossed them aside.

The second group of locals, emitting wheezes of excitement, dashed up, eager for the fray. Retief met one with a straight right, knocked two more aside with a sweep of his arm, sprinted for the door through which the second party of locals had appeared. He looked back to see Mulvihill toss another Gaspierre aside, pluck Wee Willie from the melee.

"Down here, Julie!" The girl called. "Come on, Professor!"

The tall, lean Terran, backed against the wall by three hissing

locals, stretched out a yard-long arm, flapped his hand. A large white pigeon appeared, fluttered, squawking and snorting. Professor Fate plunged through them, grabbed the bird by the legs as he passed, dashed for the door where Retief and the girl waited.

There was a sound of pounding feet from the stairwell; a fresh contingent of locals came charging into view on stub legs. Retief took two steps, caught the leader full in the face with a spread hand, sent him among his followers, as Mulvihill appeared, Wee Willie over his shoulder yelling and kicking.

"There's more on the way," Retief called. "We'll have to go up."

The girl nodded, started up, three steps at a time. Mulvihill dropped the midget, who scampered after her. Professor Fate tucked his bird away, disappeared up the stairs in giant strides, Mulvihill and Retief behind him.

**O**n the roof, Retief slammed the heavy door, shot the massive bolt. It was late evening now; cool blue air flowed across the unrailed deck; faint crowd-sounds floated up from the street twenty stories below.

"Willie, go secure that other door," Mulvihill commanded. He went to the edge of the roof, looked down, shook his head, started across toward another side. The redhead called to him.

"Over here, Julie..."

Retief joined Mulvihill at her side. A dozen feet down and twenty feet distant across a narrow street



was the slanted roof of an adjacent building. A long ladder was clamped to brackets near the ridge.

"Looks like that's it," Mulvihill nodded. Suzette unlimbered a coil of light line from a clip at her waist, gauged the distance to a projecting ventilator intake, swung the rope, and let it fly. The broad loop spread, slapped the opposite roof, and encircled the target. With a tug, the girl tightened the noose, quickly whipped the end around a four-inch stack. She stooped, pulled off her shoes, tucked them in her belt, tried the taut rope with one foot.

"Take it easy, baby," Mulvihill muttered. She nodded, stepped out on the taut, down-slanting cable, braced her feet, spread her arms, and in one smooth swoop, slid along the line and stepped off the far end, turned and executed a quick curtsey.

"This is no time to ham it up," Mulvihill boomed.

"Just habit," the girl said. She went up the roof, freed the ladder, released the catch that caused an extensible section to slide out, then came back to the roof's edge, deftly raised the ladder to a vertical position.

"Catch!" she let it lean toward Mulvihill and Retief; as it fell both men caught it, lowered it the last foot.

"Hey, you guys," Willie called, "I can't get this thing locked!"

"Never mind that now," Mulvihill rumbled. "Come on, Prof," he said to the lean prestidigitator. "You first."

The professor's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He peered down at the street far below, then threw his shoulders back, clambered up onto the ladder, and started across on all fours.

"Don't look down Professor," Suzie called. "Look at me."

"Let's go, Willie!" Mulvihill called over his shoulder. He freed the rope, tossed it across, then stepped up on the ladder, started across, one small step at a time. "This isn't my strong suit," he muttered, teeth together. The Professor had reached the far side. Mulvihill was half way. There was a sudden yelp from Willie. Retief turned. The midget was struggling against a door which was being forced open from inside.

"Hey!" Mulvihill boomed. Suzie squealed. Retief sprinted for the embattled midget, caught him as he was hurled backward as the door flew open, disgorging three Gaspierre who staggered for balance, and went down as Retief thrust out a foot. He thrust Wee Willie aside, picked up the nearest native, pitched him back inside, followed with the other two, then slammed the door, and tried the bolt.

"It's sprung," he said. "Let's go, Willie!" He caught up the small man, ran for the ladder where Mulvihill still stood, halfway across.

"Come on, Julie!" The girl cried. "It won't hold both of you!"

There were renewed breathy yells from the site of the scuffle. The door had burst open and more Gaspierre were spilling from it. Mulvi-

hill snorted, finished the crossing in two jumps, scrambled for footing on the slanting roof. Retief stepped out on the limber ladder, started across, Willie under his arm.

"Look out!" Suzette said sharply. The rungs jumped under Retief's feet. He reached the roof, dropped the midget, and turned to see a huddle of Gaspierre tugging at the ladder. One rendered reckless in his zeal, started across. Retief picked up the end of the ladder, shook it; the local squeaked, scrambled back. Retief hauled the ladder in.

"Up here," the girl called. Retief went up the slope, looked down at an open trap door in the opposite slope. He followed the others down through it into a musty loft, latched it behind him. The loft door opened into an empty hall. They followed it, found a lift, rode it down to ground level. Outside in a littered alley, the crowd noises were faint.

"We appear to have outfoxed the ruffians," Professor Fate said, adjusting his cuffs.

"The Gaspers ain't far behind," Wee Willie shrilled. "Let's make tracks."

"We'll find a spot and hide out until dark," Retief said. "Then we'll make our try."

#### IV

A faint gleam from Gaspierre's three bright-star-sized moons dimly illuminated the twisting alley along which Retief led the four Terrans.

"The port is half a mile from the city wall," he said softly to Mulvi-

hill at his side. "We can climb it between watchtowers, and circle around and hit the ramp from the east."

"They got any guards posted out there?" the big man asked.

"Oh-oh, here's the wall..." The barrier loomed up, twelve feet high. Suzette came forward, looked it over.

"I'll check the top," she said. "Give me a boost, Julie." He lifted her, raised her to arm's length. She put a foot on the top of his head, stepped up.

Mulvihill grunted. "Watch out some Gasper cop doesn't spot you."

"Coast is clear." She pulled herself up. "Come on, Willie, I'll give you a hand." Mulvihill lifted the midget, who caught the girl's hand, and scrambled up. Mulvihill bent over, and Retief stepped in his cupped hands, then to the big man's shoulders, and reached the top of the wall. The girl lowered her rope for Mulvihill. He clambered up, swearing softly, with Retief's help hoisted his bulk to the top of the wall. A moment later the group was moving off quietly across open ground toward the south edge of the port.

Lying flat at the edge of the ramp, Retief indicated a looming, light-encrusted silhouette.

"That's her," he said. "Half a million tons, crew of three hundred."

"Big enough, ain't she?" Wee Willie chirped.

"Hsst! There's a Krultch!" Mulvihill pointed.

Retief got to his feet. "Wait until I get in position behind that fuel

monitor." He pointed to a dark shape crouching fifty feet distant. "Then make a few suspicious noises."

"I better go with you, Retief," Mulvihill started, but Retief was gone. He moved forward silently, reached the shelter of the heavy apparatus, watched the Krultch sentinel move closer, stepping daintily as a deer on its four sharp hooves. The alien had reached a point a hundred feet distant when there was a sharp ping! from behind Retief. The guard halted; Retief heard the snick of a power gun's action. The Krultch turned toward him. He could hear the cli-clack, cli-clack of the hooves now. At a distance of ten feet, the quadruped slowed, came to a halt. Retief could see the vicious snout of the gun aimed warily into the darkness. There was another sound from Mulvihill's position. The guard plucked something from the belt rigged across his chest, and started toward the source of the sound. As he passed Retief he shied suddenly, and grabbed for his communicator. Retief leaped, landed a haymaker on the bony face, and caught the microphone before it hit the pavement. The Krultch, staggering back from the blow, went to his haunches and struck out with knife-edged forefeet. Retief ducked aside, chopped hard at the collar bone. The Krultch collapsed with a choked cry. Mulvihill appeared at a run, seized the feebly moving guard, pulled off the creature's belt, trussed his four legs together, and then, using other straps to bind the hands, he gagged the powerful jaws.

"Now what?" Wee Willie inquired. "You gonna cut his throat?"

"Shove him back of the monitor," Mulvihill said.

"Now let's see how close we can get to the ship without getting spotted," Retief said.

The mighty Krultch war vessel, a black column towering into the night, was ablaze with varicolored running and navigation lights. Giant floods mounted far up on the ship's sleek sides cast puddles of blue-white radiance on the tarmac; from the main cabin amidships, softer light gleamed through wide view windows.

"All lit up like a party," Mulvihill growled.

"A tough party to crash," Wee Willie said, looking up the long slant of the hull.

"I think I see a route, Mr. Retief," the girl said. "What's that little square opening up there, just past the gun emplacement?"

"It looks as though it might be a cargo hatch. It's not so little, Miss La Flamme! it's a long way up—"

"You reckon I could get through it?"

Retief nodded, looking up at the smooth surface above. "Can you make it up there?"

"They used to bill me as the human lady-bug. Nothing to it."

"If you get in," Retief said, "Try to find your way back down into the tube compartment. If you can open one of these access panels, we're in."

Suzette nodded, took out her rope, tossed a loop over a projec-

tion fifteen feet above, and clambered quickly up the landing jack to its junction with the smooth metal of the hull. She put her hands flat against the curving, slightly inslanting wall before her, planted one crepe-soled shoe against a tiny weld seam and started up the sheer wall.

Ten minutes passed. From the deep shadow at the ship's stern, Retief watched as the slim girl inched her way up, skirting a row of orange glare panels spelling out the name of the vessel in blocky Krultch ideographs, taking advantage of a ventilator outlet for a minute's rest, then going on up, up, thirty feet now, forty, forty-five . . .

She reached the open hatch raised her head cautiously for a glance inside, then swiftly pulled up and disappeared through the opening.

Julius Mulvihill heaved a sigh of relief. "That was as tough a climb as Suzie ever made," he rumbled.

"Don't get happy yet," Wee Willie piped up. "Her troubles is just starting."

"I'm sure she'll encounter no difficulty," Professor Fate said anxiously. "Surely there'll be no one on duty aft, here in port."

More minutes ticked past. Then there was a rasp of metal, a gentle clatter. A few feet above ground, a panel swung out: Suzie's face appeared, oil streaked.

"Boy, this place needs a good scrubbing," she breathed. "Come on; they're all having a shindig up above, sounds like."

Inside the echoing, gloomy vault

of the tub compartment, Retief studied the layout of equipment, the placement of giant cooling baffles, and the contour of the bulkheads.

"This is a Krultch-built job," he said. "But it seems to be a pretty fair copy of an old Concordiat cruiser of the line. That means the controls are all the way forward."

"Let's get started!" Wee Willie went to the wide-runged catwalk designed for goat-like Krultch feet, started up. The others followed. Retief glanced around, reached for the ladder. As he did, a harsh Krultch voice snapped, "Halt where you are, Terrans!"

Retief turned slowly. A dirt-smearred Krultch in baggy coveralls stepped from the concealment of a massive ion-collector, a grim-looking power gun aimed. He waited as a second and third sailor followed him, all armed.

"A nice catch, Udas," one said admiringly in Krultch. "The captain said we'd have Terry labor to do the dirty work on the run back, but I didn't expect to see 'em volunteering."

"Get 'em down here together, Jesau," the first Krultch barked. His partner came forward, motioned with the gun.

"Retief, you savvy Fustian?" Mulvihill muttered.

"Uh-huh," Retief answered.

"You hit the one on the left; I'll take the bird on the right. Professor —"

"Not yet," Retief said.

"No talk!" the Krultch barked in Terran. "Come down!"

The Terrans descended to the deck, stood in a loose group.

"Closer together!" the sailor said; he poked the girl with the gun to emphasize the command. She smiled at him sweetly. "You bat-eared son of a goat, just wait till I get a handful of your whiskers!"

"No talk!"

Professor Fate edged in front of the girl. He held out both hands toward the leading Krultch, flipped them over to show both sides, then twitched his wrists, fanned two sets of playing cards. He waved them under the astounded nose of the nearest gunman, and with a flick they disappeared.

The two rearmost sailors stepped closer, mouths open. The professor snapped his fingers; flame shot from the tip of each pointed forefinger. The Krultch jumped. The tall Terran waved his hands, whipped a gauzy blue handkerchief from nowhere, swirled it around; now it was red. He snapped it sharply, and a shower of confetti scattered around the dumbfounded Krultch. He doubled his fists, popped them open; whooped into the aliens' faces. A final wave, and a white bird was squawking in the air.

"Now!" Retief said, and took a step, uppercut the leading sailor; the slender legs buckled as the creature went down with a slam. Mulvihill was past him, catching Krultch number two with a roundhouse swipe. The third sailor made a sound like tearing sheet metal, brought his gun to bear on Retief as Wee Willie, hurtling forward, hit him at the knees. The shot melted a furrow



in the wall as Mulvihill floored the hapless creature with a mighty blow.

"Neatly done," Professor Fate said, tucking things back into his cuffs. "Almost a pity to lose such an appreciative audience."

With the three Krultch securely strapped hand and foot in their own harnesses, Retief nudged one with his foot.

"We have important business to contract in the control room," he said. "We don't want to disturb anyone, Jesau, so we'd prefer a nice quiet approach via the back stairs. What would you suggest?"

The Krultch made a suggestion.

Retief said, "Professor, perhaps you'd better give him a few more samples."

"Very well." Professor Fate stepped forward, waved his hands; a slim-bladed knife appeared in one. He tested the edge with his thumb, which promptly dripped gore. He stroked the thumb with another finger; the blood disappeared. He nodded.

"Now, fellow," he said to the sailor. "I've heard you rascals place great store by your beards; what about a shave?" He reached —

The Krultch made a sound like glass shattering. "The port catwalk!" he squalled. "But you won't get away with this!"

"Oh, no?" The professor smiled gently, made a pass in the air, plucked a small cylinder from nowhere.

"I doubt if anyone will be along this way for many hours," he said.

"If we fail to return safely in an hour, this little device will detonate with sufficient force to distribute your component atoms over approximately twelve square miles." He placed the object by the Krultch, who rolled horrified eyes at it.

"Oh — on second thought, try the service catwalk behind the main tube," he squeaked.

"Good enough," Retief said. "Let's go."

## V

The sounds of Krultch revelry were loud in the cramped passage.

"Sounds like they're doing a little early celebrating for tomorrow's big diplomatic victory," Mulvihill said. "You suppose most of them are in there?"

"There'll be a few on duty," Retief said. "But that sounds like a couple of hundred out of circulation for the moment — until we trip something and give the alarm."

"The next stretch is all right," Professor Fate said, coming back dusting off his hands. "Then I'm afraid we shall have to emerge into the open."

"We're not far from the command deck now," Retief said. "Another twenty feet, vertically, ought to do it."

The party clambered on up, negotiated a sharp turn, came to an exit panel. Professor Fate put his ear against it.

"All appears silent," he said. "Shall we sally forth?"

Retief came to the panel, eased

it open, glanced out; then he stepped through, motioned the others to follow. It was quieter here; there was deep-pile carpeting underfoot, an odor of alien food and drug-smoke in the air.

"Officers' country," Mulvihill muttered.

Retief pointed toward a door marked with Krultch lettering. "Anybody read that?" he whispered.

There were shakes of the head and whispered negatives.

"We'll have to take a chance." Retief went to the door, gripped the latch, and yanked it suddenly wide. An obese Krultch in uniform belt but without his tunic looked up from a brightly colored magazine on the pages of which Retief glimpsed glossy photos of slender-built Krultch maids flirting saucy derrieres at the camera.

The alien stuffed the magazine in a desk slot, came to his feet, gaping, than whirled and dived for a control panel across the narrow passage in which he was posted. He reached a heavy lever and hauled it down just as Retief caught him with a flying tackle. Man and Krultch hit the deck together; Retief's hand chopped; the Krultch kicked twice and lay still.

"That lever — you suppose —" Wee Willie started.

"Probably an alarm," Retief said, coming to his feet. "Come on!" he ran along the corridor; it turned sharply to the right. A heavy door was sliding shut before him. He leaped to it, wedged himself in the narrowing opening,

braced against the thrust of the steel panel. It slowed, with a groaning of machinery. Mulvihill charged up, grasped the edge of the door and heaved. Somewhere, metal creaked. There was a loud *clunk!* and a clatter of broken mechanism.

The door slid freely back.

"Close," Mulvihill grunted. "For a minute there —" he broke off at a sound from behind him. Ten feet back along the passage a second panel had slid noiselessly out, sealing off the corridor, Mulvihill jumped to it, heaved against it.

Ahead, Retief saw a third panel, this one standing wide open. He plunged through it; skidded to a halt. A braided Krultch officer was waiting, a foot-long purple cigar in his mouth, a power gun in each hand. He kicked a lever near his foot. The door whooshed shut behind Retief.

"Ah, welcome aboard, Terran," the captain grated. "You can be the first of your kind to enjoy Krultch hospitality."

"I have been observing your progress on my inspection screen here," the captain nodded toward a small panel which showed a view of the four Terrans pushing fruitlessly against the doors that had closed to entrap them.

"Interesting," Retief commented.

"You are surprised at the sophistication of the equipment we Krultch can command?" the captain puffed out smoke, showed horny gums in a smile-like grimace.

"No, anybody who can steal the price can buy a Groaci spy-eye system," Retief said blandly. "But I

find it interesting that you had to spend all that cash just to keep an eye on your crew. Not too trustworthy, eh?"

"What? Any of my crew would die at my command!"

"They'll probably get the chance, too," Retief nodded agreement. "How about putting one of the guns down — unless you're afraid of a misfire."

"Krultch guns never misfire." The captain tossed one pistol aside. "But I agree: I am overprotected against the paltry threat of a single Terran."

"You're forgetting — I have friends."

The Krultch made a sound like fingernails on a blackboard. "They are effectively immobilized," he said. "Now, tell me, what did you hope to accomplish by intruding here?"

"I intend to place you under arrest," Retief said. "Mind if I sit down?"

The Krultch captain made laughing noises resembling a flawed drive bearing; he waved a two-fingered claw-hand.

"Make yourself comfortable — while you can," he said. "Now, tell me, how did you manage to get your equipment up to my ship without being seen? I shall impale the slackers responsible, of course."

"Oh, we have no equipment," Retief said breezily. He sniffed, "That's not a Lovenbroy cigar, is it?"

"Never smoke anything else," the Krultch said. "Care for one?"

"Don't mind if I do," Retief ad-

mitted. He accepted an eighteen-inch stogie, lit up.

"Now, about the equipment," the captain persisted. "I assume you used fifty-foot scaling ladders, though I confess I don't see how you got them onto the port —"

"Ladders?" Retief smiled comfortably. "We Terrans don't need ladders; we just sprouted wings."

"Wings?"

"Oh, we're versatile, we Terries."

The captain was wearing an expression of black disapproval now. "If you had no ladders, I must conclude that you breached my hull at ground level," he snapped. "What did you use? It would require at least a fifty K-T-Second power input to penetrate two inches of flint-steel —"

Retief shook his head, puffing out scented smoke. "Nice," he said. "No, we just peeled back a panel bare-handed. We Terrans —"

"Blast you Terrans! Nobody could." The captain clamped his jaws, puffed furiously. "Just outside, in the access-control chamber you sabotaged the closure mechanism. Where is the hydraulic jack you used for this?"

"As I said, we Terrans —"

"You entered the secret access passage almost as soon as you boarded my vessel!" the captain screeched. "My men are inoculated against every talk-drug known! What did you use on the traitor who informed you!"

Retief held up a hand. "We Terrans can be very persuasive, Captain. At this very moment, you



yourself, for example, are about to be persuaded of the futility of trying to out-manuever us."

The Krultch commander's mouth opened and closed. "Me!" he burst out. "You think that you can divert a Krultch officer from the performance of his duty?"

"Sure," a high voice piped from above and behind the captain. "Nothing to it."

The Krultch's hooves clattered as he whirled, froze at the sight of Wee Willie's small, round face smiling down at him from the ventilator register above the control panel. In a smooth motion, Retief cracked the alien across the wrist, and twitched the gun from his nerveless hand.

"You see?" he said as the officer stared from him to the midget and back. "Never underestimate us Terrans."

The captain drooped in his chair, mopping at his face with a polka-dotted hanky provided by Wee Willie.

"This interrogation is a gross illegality!" he groaned. "I was assured that all your kind did was talk —"

"We're a tricky lot," Retief conceded. "But surely a little innocent deception can be excused, once you understand our natures. We love strife, and this seemed to be the easiest way to stir up some action."

"Stir up action?" the Krultch croaked.

"There's something about an apparently defenseless nincompoop that brings out the opportunist in people," Retief said. "It's a simple way for us to identify trouble-



makers, so they can be dealt with expeditiously. I think you Krultch qualify handsomely. It's convenient timing, because we have a number of new planet-wrecking devices we've been wanting to field-test."

"You're bluffing!" the Krultch bleated.

Retief nodded vigorously. "I have to warn you, but you don't have to believe me. So if you still want to try conclusions —"

There was a sharp buzz from the panel; a piercing yellow light blinked rapidly. The captain's hand twitched as he eyed the phone.

"Go ahead, answer it," Retief said. "But don't say anything that might annoy me. We Terrans have quick tempers."

The Krultch flipped a key.

"Exalted One," a rapid Krultch voice babbled from the panel. "We have been assassinated by captives! I mean, captivated by assassins! There were twelve of them—or perhaps twenty! Some were as high as a hundred-year Fufu tree, and others smaller than hoof-nits! One had eyes of live coals, and flames ten feet long shot from his hands, melting all they touched, and another —"

"Silence!" the captain roared. "Who are you? Where are you? What in the name of the Twelve Devils is going on here!" He whirled on Retief. "Where are the rest of your commandos! How did they evade my surveillance system? What —"

"Ah-ah," Retief clucked. "I'm asking the questions now. First, I'll

have the names of all Gaspierre officials who accepted your bribes."

"You think I would betray my compatriots to death at your hands?"

"Nothing like that; I just need to know who the cooperative ones are so I can make them better offers."

A low brackk! sounded; this time a baleful blue light winked. The Krultch officer eyed it warily.

"That's my outside hot line to the Foreign Office," he said. "When word reaches the Gaspierre government of the piratical behavior you allegedly peaceful Terries indulge in behind the facade of diplomacy —"

"Go ahead, tell them," Retief said. "It's time they discovered they aren't the only ones who understand the fine art of the triple-cross."

The Krultch lifted the phone. "Yes?" he snapped. His expression stiffened. He rolled an eye at Retief, then at Wee Willie.

"What's that?" he barked into the communicator. "Flew through the air? Climbed where? What do you mean, giant white birds!"

"Boy," Wee Willie exclaimed. "Them Gaspers sure exaggerate!"

The captain eyed the tiny man in horror, comparing his height with Retief's six-three.

He shuddered.

"I know," he said into the phone.

"They're already here . . ." He dropped the instrument back on its hook, glanced at his panel, idly reached —

"That reminds me," Retief said. He pointed the gun at the center of the captain's chest. "Order

all hands to assemble amidships," he said.

"They — they're already there," the Krultch said unsteadily, his eyes fixed on the gun.

"Just make sure."

The captain depressed a key, cleared his throat.

"All hands to the central feeding area, on the double," he said.

There was a moment's pause. Then a Krultch voice came back: "All except the stand-by crews in power section and armaments, I guess you mean, Exalted One"

"I said all hands, damn you!" the officer snarled. He flipped off the communicator. "I don't know what you think you'll accomplish with this," he barked. "I have three hundred fearless warriors aboard this vessel; you'll never get off this ship alive!"

Two minutes passed. The communicator crackled. "All hands assembled, sir."

"Willie, you see that big white lever?" Retief said mildly. "Just pull it down, and the next one to it."

The captain made as if to move. The gun jumped at him. Willie went past the Krultch, wrestled the controls down. Far away, machinery rumbled. A distinct shock ran through the massive hull, then a second.

"What was that?" Willie asked.

"The disaster bulkheads, sliding shut," Retief said. "The three hundred fearless warriors are nicely locked in between them."

The captain slumped, looking stricken. "How do you know so much about the operation of my

vessel?" he demanded. "It's classified . . ."

"That's the result of stealing someone else's plans; the wrong people may have been studying them. Now, Willie go let Julius and the rest of the group in; then I think we'll be ready to discuss surrender terms."

"This is a day that will live in the annals of treachery," the captain grated hollowly.

"Oh, I don't think it needs to get into the annals," Retief said. "Not if we can come to a private understanding, just between gentlemen."

## VI

It was an hour past sunrise when the emergency meeting of the Gaspierre Cabinet broke up. Ambassador Sheepshorn, emerging from the chamber deep in amiable conversation with an uncomfortable-looking Krultch officer in elaborate full dress uniform, halted as he spied Retief.

"Ah, there, my boy! I was a trifle concerned when you failed to return last evening; but, as I was just pointing out to the Captain here, it was really all just a dreadful misunderstanding. Once the Krultch position was made clear — that they really preferred animal husbandry and folk dancing to any sort of war-like adventures, the Cabinet was able to come to a rapid and favorable decision on the Peace-and-Friendship Treaty, giving Terrans full Most Favored Nation status."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said, nodding to

the stoney-faced Krultch commander. "I'm sure we'd all rather engage in friendly competition than have to demonstrate our negotiating ability any further."

There was a stir at the end of the corridor; a harried-looking Krultch officer with a grimy Krultch yeoman in tow appeared, came up to the captain, and saluted.

"Exalted One, this fellow has just escaped from some sort of magical paralysis."

"It was that one," the sailor indicated Retief. "Him and the others." He looked reproachfully at Retief. "That was a dirty trick, telling us that was a bomb you were planting; we spend a rough night before we found out it was just a dopestick."

"Sorry," Retief said.

"Look, Exalted One," the sailor went on in a stage whisper. "What I wanted to warn you about, that Terry—the long one, with the pointed tail and the fiery breath; he's a warlock; he waves his hands and giant white flying creatures appear—"

"Silence, idiot!" the captain belated. "Have you no powers of observation? They don't merely produce birds; any fool could do that! They transform themselves! Now get out of my sight! I plan to enter a monastery as soon as we return home, and I want to get started on my meditating!" He nodded curtly and clattered away.

"Odd sort of chap," Sheepshorn commented. "I wonder what he was talking about?"

"Just some sort of in-group joke,

I imagine," Retief said. "By the way, about that group of distressed terrans I mentioned to you—"

"Yes. I may have been a bit abrupt with them, Retief; but of course I was busy planning my strategy for today's meeting. Perhaps I was hasty. I hereby authorize you to put in a good word for them."

"I took the liberty of going a little farther than that," Retief said. "Since the new treaty calls for Terran cultural missions, I signed a six months contract with them to put on shows here on Gaspierre."

Sheepshorn frowned. "You went a bit beyond your authority, Retief," he snapped. "I'd thought we might bring in a nice group or two to read classic passages from the Congressional Record, or perform some of the new silent music; and I had half-way promised the Garoci Minister I'd have one of his nose-flute troupes—"

"I thought it might be a good idea to show Terran solidarity, just at this juncture," Retief pointed out. "Then, too, a demonstration of sword-swallowing, prestidigitation, fire-eating, juggling, tight-rope walking, acrobatics and thaumaturgics might be just the ticket for dramatizing versatility."

Sheepshorn considered with pursed lips, then nodded. "You may have a valuable point there, my boy; we Terrans are a versatile breed. Speaking of which, I wish you'd been there to see my handling of the negotiation this morning! One moment I was all fire and truculence; the next, as smooth as Yill silk."

"A brilliant performance, I dare say, Mr. Ambassador."

"Yes, indeed," Sheepshorn rubbed his hands together, chuckling. "In a sense, Retief, diplomacy itself might be thought of as a branch of show business, eh? Thus, these performers might be considered colleagues of a sort."

"True, but I wouldn't mention it when they're within earshot."

"Yes, it might go to their heads. Well, I'm off, Retief. My report on this morning's work will become a classic study of Terran diplomatic subtlety."

He hurried away. A Gaspierre

with heavy bifocal lenses edged up to Retief.

"I'm with the *Gaspierre Morning Exhalation*," he wheezed. "Is it true, sire, that you Terries can turn into fire-breathing dragons at will?"

A second reporter closed in. "I heard you read minds," he said. "And about this ability to walk through walls—"

"Just a minute, boys," Retief held up a hand. "I wouldn't want to be quoted on this of course, but just between you and me, here's what actually happened, as soon as the Ambassador had looked into his crystal ball . . ." END

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# AGAINST THE ODDS

by JOHN BRUNNER

*Having two thousand inhabited planets to supervise, anybody might mislay one now and then!*

For such a racket to come from the anteroom on the far side of the door which bore the discreet gold-lettered warning SUPERINTENDENT OF GALACTIC RECORDS was unprecedented. It was rare enough for anyone to raise his voice at all here on Galrex — its mile-square, mile-deep computer-banked halls made it the effective center of power for the entire Lens, and the sensation that history was looking over your shoulder inspired an awed hush.

Right now, though, someone was actually shouting, so loudly that Superintendent Motice Bain could hear the words without activating his desk communicators. A man, almost hysterical, was crying out over and over.

“But I must see him! Something must be done! The human race is in danger!”

A crank? Frowning over the too-facile explanation — for it would take an incredibly persistent crank to get to the very peak of the Galrex hierarchy — Bain switched on the TV pickups and inspected the scene beyond the door. Three harassed androids and a half-frantic human aide were trying to quiet a wild-faced man in clothing that suggested he might hail from one of the Bondageworlds: a rough brown shirt and a black kilt with knee-boots. But he had black hair all over the place, a brush-stiff beard and bushy eyebrows, whereas the Bondsmen usually shaved their entire bodies.

*The human race in danger, hm?*

Bain quirked up the corners of his thin-lipped mouth and raised the gain on the communicators to full.

"What is it Ivor?" he demanded of the aide in the anteroom.

There was a moment of shocked silence. Ivor broke it with an accusing exclamation.

"Now see what you've done! You've interrupted Super-Galrex!"

"That's what I've been trying to do!" the bearded man bellowed, unrepentant. But this final stab of defiance was the most he could manage; one more second, and he had subsided into a frightened half-cringe, matching Ivor's own.

"Well?" Bain rapped.

"Sir, forgive the disturbance, but really we have done our best to prevent him . . ." Ivor hesitated, wiping his forehead with the back of a nervous hand. "He's a fanatic, sir, that's all. I've sent for a medic, and we'll get him to the hospital as quickly as we can."

"I'm not crazy, damn it!" the bearded man exploded. "And here are the figures to prove it!" He reached to the hip pocket of his kilt and flourished a sheaf of documents under Ivor's nose.

"But the computers say you're wrong," Ivor countered, and added to Bain, "I'm extremely sorry, sir, but he's got some notion in his head about the computers having been tampered with, to stop them giving the right answer to the problem he brought with him."

"One second." Bain rubbed his chin, considering. "Ivor, am I to understand that this man has come

all the way to Galrex especially to put a *private* problem?"

"Yes, I have," the bearded man declared.

"Hmmm . . . That makes you unusual, my friend. Star travel is expensive, to begin with, and the hire of Galrex computers isn't cheap either."

"But your facilities are supposed to be public property," the bearded man snapped. "Anyone can use them if he wants!"

"Granted, granted. In fact, though, planetary governments are our regular customers. There's nothing special about the computers here — we simply have more of them than anyone else in the galaxy, because of the immense quantities of data we have to process." Out of the corner of his eye, Bain noted with hidden amusement Ivor's astonishment at seeing Super-Galrex make light conversation with an obvious fanatic. "So tell me why you needed to use our facilities, and not those available on any civilized planet, Mr. —?"

"Falkirk," said the bearded man. The frenzy had gone out of him, to be replaced by exaggerated deference. Ivor was apparently much impressed by that fact, but Bain had small respect for his aide's ability to deal with human beings. He was good with computers, but he lacked insight. One glance should have told him that Falkirk was honestly angry, and therefore accessible to reason.

"Go on," he invited.

Falkirk took a deep breath.

"I had to come here, sir, because nowhere else could I obtain all the information likely to be required in

evaluating the solution. There are factors involved which cover nearly a dozen star-systems."

"A personal problem of virtually galactic scope?" Bain measured humorous skepticism into his voice. Ivor pounced on this return to something like his chief's normal behaviour.

"Yes, sir. You see, Falkirk has—"

"Shut up." Bain reached a quick decision. "Bring Falkirk in here. I can spare him two minutes to convince me he's not a crank, and twelve minutes more if he succeeds. Is that fair, Mr. Falkirk?"

"Yes, sir!" said the bearded man, and dived for the door as it slid aside.

"This will give you an idea of the scale of the thing I've stumbled on," he said as he perched gingerly on the edge of the chair facing Bain. He couldn't quite meet the piercing gaze of the Superintendent, but glanced at him sidelong, seeming to pay more attention to the artificial view of grassy meadows and far blue mountains projected on the outside of the window behind the desk.

He handed over the top page from his sheaf of documents, and Bain scanned it as he put some further questions. It was nothing but a table of figures, as well known to him as his own name.

"Are you from one of the Bondageworlds. Mr. Falkirk?"

"No, sir. Don't be misled by these clothes. I had to hock my thermosuits on Fenris to make up the balance of the fare here."

*Approx. total of inhabited planets at present:  $2 \times 10^3$ .*

"Your professional background? Clearly, you're an educated man, and you must have done moderately well in some highly skilled job to even consider bringing your problem here to Galrex."

*Approx. human population at present:  $2.1 \times 10^{12}$ .*

"Yes, sir. By training I'm a cosmoeologist."

Bain's nape prickled ever so faintly. He read on—*Approx. total of starships in service:  $4.3 \times 10^4$ .*

"You're not a mathematician, then," he suggested.

Falkirk bridled. "Sir, there's nothing wrong with the figures I've compiled, in spite of the fact that the computers here refused to give me a rational solution—"

*Average number in crew of ship:  $10^1$ .*

That was as far as Bain could be bothered to read. He pushed the table of figures across the slick surface of the desk, and it skidded several inches in Falkirk's direction.

"Let me make an enlightened guess," he said. "You've noted the occurrence of an event against which the odds appear inconceivably large. You feel it ought to be investigated. Am I correct?"

With unconcealed respect, Falkirk stared at him. "Exactly, sir. But this is no ordinary event in any case, regardless of the actual odds . . ." He nerved himself for the final plunge.

"What would you say if you were told that the entire crew of one single interstellar ship had wound up



in positions of fantastic power and influence within a few years of their simultaneous decision to retire from space?"

"Interesting," was all Bain allowed himself to say. "Your two minutes are nearly up. Give me a few more details, and I'll decide whether you can have your extra time."

"Among them are the Premier of Nokomis, the Autarch of Ling, the richest man on Quetzal, the chief priest of the state religion on Thummim —"

"An impressive roster!" Bain broke in. "Very well, Mr. Falkirk, I'll concede your sincerity, if nothing more. Now, from the beginning and in full, if you please — but stick to the point, because I am a very busy man."

We're so far from being the first intelligent inhabitants of the galaxy (Falkirk said) that there's no shortage of subjects for investigation by cosmoarcheologists, even making allowance for the fact that it's not a popular discipline, so funds for jobs like the study of relics on non-terrestrial planets are hard to come by.

So you might think it silly of me to have decided right at the outset of my career that there was precisely one predecessor species I wanted to devote my life to: those who used to inhabit the world we call Gorgon.

On the face of it, there wasn't anything so remarkable about those creatures. Physically they must have had a great deal in common with us, so the biologists aren't very interested, and they never achieved

spaceflight, so the psychologists have dismissed them as rather dull. What's more, their entire body of relics was concentrated on a small island in Gorgon's southern hemisphere, which argues that they were singularly unenterprising.

On the other hand, when I was still in school I ran across a story about them. I can't remember exactly where. But it fascinated me, even though it was no more than an ill-documented legend. According to the traditions, they'd developed as the final flowering of their culture a dynamic training technique which would enable any remotely similar creature to get the optimum performance from its nervous system by bringing under conscious control the faculty we refer to as "luck". I don't know how this was supposed to be done — possibly by developing an intuitive awareness of the most probable course of large-scale events. And this, allegedly, was the root of their eventual downfall: uniformly fortunate, they bored themselves into extinction.

Since this must have happened at least several centuries before we discovered a stardrive, you'll ask how it is the legend got into circulation. Well, according to what I recall from this source — I wish I could locate it again! — the discoverer of Gorgon was one of the great pioneering starscouts, a man named Morgan Wade. Morgan — Gorgon: you see he gave the planet a name which rhymed with his own.

Sorry, I'm digressing. The point is, this scout was supposed to have found a key to the dead race's

methods among the relics they'd left. Of course, this was in the early days of space exploration, three or four hundred years back, and finding alien remains wasn't the commonplace event it later became. So he spent several months investigating, and finally worked out the details of this training technique of theirs.

Whereupon he went home and quit spacing for good. He turned his attention to the acquisition of wealth and power, and in a few years he'd become one of the richest and most important men alive. True, you might argue this was sheer chance — a famous pioneering starscout, deciding to switch careers, would have a good deal in his favor to begin with; the prestige of his reputation, for example.

Nonetheless, I'm certain there was more to it than shows on the surface, and here's why.

It had always been my intention to devote myself to the definitive study of the Gorgon remains. During my early work in cosmoarcheology I saved as much as I possibly could from my salary, with the sole purpose of financing an independent expedition to Gorgon and settling this — this myth that haunted me, once and for all.

**I** was extremely worried that I might not achieve my goal, because as you know Gorgon has been open for colonization for nearly half a century, and I had visions of some blockhead sitting a cement factory on top of the alien relics. So, as soon as I could afford it, I went

out there to survey the ground and perhaps reserve the digging rights if I could find a helpful government official.

What I found was so much worse than a mere cement factory I can hardly bring myself to think about it.

About eight or nine years ago, a starship in distress broke from hyper and had to put down on Gorgon for repairs. They came in on a southerly orbit, and the island with the relics was the easiest place for them to land. I imagine they were furious at failing to make the main colonial base, not that it would have made much difference to the length of their stay. For when they radioed the main base for some major spare part they needed, it turned out not to be in stock, and had to be flown in from another star-system.

So — they waited. And it's my belief that, having nothing better to do, they set about deciphering the records left by the vanished aliens. It had been done once already — perhaps they even found some notes left by Morgan Wade; I don't know.

What I do know is that a month or five weeks went by, and the spare part arrived and was flown out from the colonial base, and away they went.

Laying the entire island waste with their drive as they took off.

I've been there. I've seen it. It haunts my dreams, and I wake up crying with rage and frustration. There's nothing left now but a pile of calcined rubble on a bare platform of rock sticking out of the sea. I'm certain it wasn't an accident,

though that's what they tried to tell me on Gorgon. They maintained that the repairs must have been inadequate; the engineers are supposed to have overlooked some fault more serious than the one they spotted. But this implies that the engineers were incompetent, and I'm just not buying that. Does an incompetent man almost immediately set himself up as the head of a private army on Brocken and overthrow the government, becoming virtual dictator a few months later?

That's what happened to the chief engineer!

I was so heartbroken at this ruination of my lifelong ambitions that my first thought was this: I ought to make them pay for what I regarded as an unforgivable crime. I had some vague notion of suing the crew for the value of the items they'd destroyed — I told one of the planetary councilmen that I could get a museum on Earth to certify a value for him, and though he personally didn't give a damn about alien relics he liked the idea of a windfall to the treasury. So he got the government to stake me the fare to the ship's latest recorded port of call.

Well, I caught up with her. Only to find that every last one of her crew who'd been aboard when she landed on Gorgon had done the same as Morgan Wade and quit space for good.

Following their separate trails was naturally more difficult and more expensive. I was often tempted to give up and content myself with grubbing on some other planet after

some far less interesting species than the Gorgon race, especially when the Gorgon government decided they were throwing good money after bad and withdrew the retainer they'd been paying me. Worse yet, the chief engineer had become dictator of Brocken, as I said, and thus put himself effectively beyond reach of a private suit against him; and the ship's MO had joined the priestly hierarchy on Thummim, where he enjoyed legal immunity, and —

But that was when I spotted the incredible coincidence. It defied belief that these crewmen, all from the same ship, none of whom had displayed any extraordinary talents hitherto, should turn out overnight to be great leaders. I stopped worrying about compensation for the damage they'd wantonly committed on Gorgon, and began to worry very hard indeed about their impact on the human race. If they'd become masters of whole planets within a couple of years of acquiring the Gorgon secrets, what would they do next? They'd conquer the galaxy, separately or together — and if separately, then the process of conquest was going to be indescribably dreadful for us poor untalented victims!

I spent everything I'd saved to finance my work on Gorgon. I exhausted what I'd accumulated by packing my expense claims against the Gorgon government. I bankrupted myself with interstellar fares, got credit by sheer bluster and spent it and left for some other system just ahead of the law. I believe I'm wanted on at least three planets for dishonored debts. But I don't care.

What counts is that I've finally brought my discovery to someone in a position to act against these — these exploiters of ordinary humanity!

Bain grunted. "I see. You've listed these former spacemen, have you?"

"Yes, I have full details of their recent careers right here, and what little I could pick up about their earlier lives. They seem to be covering their tracks deliberately, getting rid of as many existing records as —"

Bain snapped his fingers impatiently. "Don't waste time talking about it — let me read for myself."

"I'm sorry," Falkirk apologized sheepishly, and handed over the rest of his fat bundle of documents.

When Bain had been silent for a good half-minute, he could endure the waiting no longer. He forced out, "Well, Mr. Bain, what do you think?"

"I think it's a pity you weren't given a full mathematical education," Bain muttered, turning up the last of the many pages before him.

"What? But —!"

"Mr. Falkirk," Bain said with great deliberation, "you've submitted these findings for computer analysis, haven't you?"

"Yes." Falkirk's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "But I'm convinced someone got to the computers first. Because the results I got were *ridiculous!*"

"Just a second." Bain raised a hand. "What you hoped for, I imagine, was that the computers would

pump out some astronomically long odds, and you'd be able to approach me with this as proof of the reality of the secrets found on Gorgon: correct?"

"Why, yes. But —"

"Now here we have the odds as calculated by the computers," Bain continued imperturbably. "Naturally, using the unique memory banks here at Galrex, they did a far more thorough analysis than any unaided individual — with all respect to yourself, Mr. Falkirk. And I see the print-out reads 402,962 over 861,304 — in round numbers, about eight-seventeenths."

"Yes!" Falkirk was beside himself with excitement. "And that's obviously absurd, because —"

"Please!" Bain said sharply. "Mr. Falkirk, where do you come from originally?"

"From Isis, but I don't see what —"

"You will. On Isis, if I recall right, they still adhere to the ancient tradition of celebrating birthdays, don't they?"

"As a matter of fact, they do, but —"

"Counting Year Day, there are 365 days in a standard year. Suppose you have two dozen people in a room: what are the odds against two of them, or more, sharing their birthdays?"

Falkirk put his hand to his forehead. If Bain hadn't been Super-Galrex, doubtless he'd have refused to waste time on such a jejune question. With great effort he muttered, "Oh . . . Twenty-four, two twelves — call it thirty-six, three twelves,

times ten . . . two out of thirty . . . About fifteen to one!"

Bain shook his head heavily. "It is a pity you weren't trained as a mathematician. The actual odds are about 27 over 50, or better than evens."

"They can't be," Falkirk said, staring. "If there are 365 days in a year—"

"There's one chance in 365 that a given person's birthday will coincide with someone else's. For every additional person the odds against coincidence reduce by one; when you get to the two-dozen person it's down to 342. Now multiply all your fractions together—364 over 365, 363 over 365, and so on down to 342—and cancel. When you've done that, you'll find that there remain only about 23 chances out of 50 that the next person you try will have a birthday not already on your list. I'm sorry, but there it is. You find it equally extraordinary that out of the entire population of the galaxy ten men should suddenly and simultaneously prove to be great statesmen, leaders, business wizards—but that's because you're making an intuitive assessment, nothing better than a guess. Examining the situation rationally, the computers have contradicted you."

"But how?" Falkirk demanded. "How can this be true?"

Bain sighed. "Look, Mr. Falkirk, suppose you ring for a cab, and cab license number 1 turns up. You'd say how remarkable that was, but this is nonsense. It was a sheer damned certainty that a cab would

turn up—excluding breakdowns and so forth, naturally. In precisely the same way, you mustn't only consider factors like the galactic population and the number of ships a-space when working out your problem. You have to figure in the compensating factors that go the other way, such as that at any given time it's a hundred per cent certain somebody will be top dog on each of our two thousand-plus planets. Is it any more surprising that the dictator of Brocken should be an ex-spaceman than that—well, that I, out of two times ten to the twelfth living people, should sit in this chair?"

"Yes, but *every last one* of the crew . . ."

Doubt was creeping into Falkirk's voice now. Sensing it, Bain leaned forward to hammer his point home.

"Mr. Falkirk, I do sympathize with you. I recognize your sincerity—but for that, I'd not have accorded you so much of my time, which is rather valuable. Believe me, though, you've fallen into an elementary trap which must be over a thousand years old."

"What am I going to do?" whispered Falkirk brokenly.

"If you want my advice, you'd best forget all about this obsession of yours and go back to cosmoarcheology. There are too few good men in that field to waste someone with your persistence and drive—and who can say? Maybe you'll turn up something as interesting as these 'Gorgon secrets'."

"Yes, but I have no money, and I told you I'm wanted for debt on at least three planets!"

"Mr. Falkirk," Bain said frigidly, "I'm afraid that's trouble you've brought on your own head. You can hardly expect me to set things right for you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do."

Head bowed, moving like a man in a daze, Falkirk rose numbly and went out, not bothering to reclaim the precious sheaf of documents on which he'd based his belief in a threat to the human race. Bain gathered them together, and once more his thin mouth quirked into a smile.

"Sir, the way you handled Falkirk was magnificent!" Ivor purred from the desk communicator. "He's walked off as meek as a lamb!"

"Hm? Oh yes. I was going to tick you off about that, Ivor. You should have reasoned with him, not tried to throw him out. He was well-meaning enough, and if his thinking had been a bit less confused he might even have had a valid point. Now shut up and don't disturb me till I say so."

"Yes, sir," Ivor muttered, and the communicator fell silent.

As it was, of course, Bain reflected, Falkirk had overlooked the valid point completely. He punched for a circuit to master computer control, and uttered crisp orders.

"Get me all available data on the following persons! The new dictator of Brocken: the high priest on Thummim; the Autarch of Ling; the Premier of Nokomis . . ."

Doing well, considering. But they'd never do any better, because the odds against them were too great.

One against ten, to be precise. Insurmountable odds, when you figured in the crucial factor of control of Galrex.

"The data are extensive, Superintendent," the machine said with sweet mechanical regret. "They will take about five minutes to print out in full."

"I can wait," Bain grunted. He looked around the office, absorbing the aura of power it breathed. Yes, he'd been right from the very beginning—he'd realized, even before leaving Gorgon, that in Galrex lay the key to the entire Lens. It had taken him a long time to get here, but that was of no consequence. Among the other achievements of the race that formerly inhabited Gorgon, they'd extended their mental control of probability to the maximization of individual lifespans.

And he'd done nothing so crude as destroying the alien relics—why, that misguided action had been so conspicuous, an idiot like Falkirk had come within an ace of explaining the reason for it!

Though, as was inevitable, he'd brought his discovery to the person uniquely fitted to explain it away again . . .

Bain pursed his lips. He'd been worried for two centuries that someone might connect him and Morgan Wade. It had finally happened, and here he was, safe and sound. Really, they must have been amazing creatures, there on Gorgon! It looked as though it would take him another century to get really used to what he'd learned from them. **END**

# We Hunters Of Men

by BRUCE McALLISTER

Illustrated by GIUNTA

*He hunted the most deadly  
prey on Earth—the men  
who long ago had ruled it!*

## I

A movement high on the wall caught his eye, and Edmond Reud pushed back the hair that usually protected him from the sun, but which was now a danger to his vision.

Face and hands smeared the same ochre color as the sky, a man leaped from the wall with a rusty blade. Edmond sent a crossbow reed

low, into the belly of the scalper, and the wounded body whistled by. Dust rose even to where Edmond was sitting on his whudey. The whudey sneezed.

Another reed sang from Edmond's crossbow, piercing the fallen man in the throat.

The whudey grunted when Edmond dismounted, but was patient as he bent over and cut around the hair-line of the corpse. After a tug

and a rip, the scalp came free and Edmond sprinkled sand across its bloody side.

That makes five, which means fifty pellets on exchange, Edmond mused as he tucked the hair into a bulging pouch.

On the horizon behind him rose the Minced Mountain and its metal stalk which seemed to hold up the sky. To his left were barren mountains on which the sky merely rested, and to the right, rose jagged peaks.

At that moment the inexplicable mind-prickling began to plague him again. Edmond groaned, but looked toward the city and the pellets for which he would soon feel a need. Ahead, sandblasted and emaciated, but still succeeding in holding the mouth of the subterranean city open, towered two walls, which gradually sank into the sand and left a gaping hole for anyone who would enter the city. Although the darkness seemed menacing, Edmond Reud knew it was actually the safest place in the world.

Part of it was respect for fair play and humanity that kept men from scalping each other in the city itself. The city was a safety zone—the only safety zone. In one of its sand and dirt rooms sat an Exchanger with the pellets, the stimuli that made men hunt each other.

Sure, there were a few who tried to violate safety respect in the city, but they ended up facing the anger of everyone there, instead of just one man, as they would outside. The odds were better outside in the sun.

In the stables the whudey whined in fear of being left alone. Edmond gave it a rough pat and a back scratch, but continued on foot in the direction of his room.

He passed through the darkness into the strangely lighted chambers and passageways, the crossbow dangling on his fingertips. Why take chances? You learned that it was better to be pessimistic and end contented if nothing happened, than optimistic and *very disappointed* if something did.

Edmond squinted at the crudely lettered sign at the fork in the corridor, and glanced at the arrows pointing to the respective rooms. Ernev, Bob, Rundal. Some names had been taken down. The owners were, no doubt, lying bleached in the sun somewhere.

It had been a long time since he had last been to the city. He had left enough food and pellets for Cathy, but he feared he knew she wouldn't be waiting in his room. She wouldn't have left on her own, but there were other men with that certain pellet wealth that appealed to Cathy.

His room was empty. It had been empty a long time, for cobwebs rounded off the corners of the wood-beam ceiling. "I'm sorry," began the message scribbled on the doorbeam. "But I thought you might be dead. God bless you. Love, Cathy." Edmond laughed aloud, but the laugh kind of hurt his ears. That was Cathy, all right. He wanted to laugh again, but it just didn't come out.

No reason for him to stay around. Best get rid of the scalps





TERS OF MEN

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and head for the sun again. And hope the mind-prickling didn't resume its fury.

Exchange the scalps . . . Edmond was beginning to pant heavily, and his muscles ached. He was already beginning to need the pellets.

"Scalps," said the usual sign on the usual doorway of the room where light streamed from the usual crystal and metal object on the wall, illuminating the usual Exchanger.

A larger sign at the man's feet shouted: "Women: 20. Men: 10." The exchange for a female scalp has risen ten pellets. Some men would find it in them to collect . . . but Edmond had never wanted to try it. Respect again . . .

Cross-legged, the palid Exchanger sat in a trance. Edmond pulled out his pouch, spread the clumps of hair across the sand floor, and waited.

When he slipped back to reality, the Exchanger glanced down and in two smooth motions swept up the scalps and handed Edmond two handfuls of pellets. Edmond looked into his eyes: often he had felt himself hating this man, but respect for the safety zone had prevented him from killing and taking all the pellets. A fear of not being able to obtain pellets later on entered into his restraint also, he realized.

One last backward glance as Edmond left the room showed him the Exchanger opening his mouth slowly and in it placing a large oblong pellet that looked impossible to swallow.

Edmond had never thought of a second kind of pellet existing, but the Exchanger had just taken one.

**T**o Crux Orbit 1 Terra: I am officer replacing Com Stapleton. Would like to know what is trouble with planet Tinni. Have no background at all. SOS.

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Use SOS only when serious. Believe everything you've heard about Tinni. Is small hot planet and was one of twelve planets beset by aliens called Judicians. Judicians crisped seven planets with nonradioactive burner before Dept. Forces annihilated all Judicians except those who managed to enclose Tinni in charge field. Some human colonists are trapped under charge field with Judicians. We believe all Judician weapons on Tinni were destroyed or damaged and Judicians are a physically weak race so Judicians should not be any great threat to Tinni colonists in those senses. However we must assume that Judicians will try any means for destroying as many human colonists as possible. Judician nature to be nonsubmissive. How they may be killing humans we do not know. We are under pressure from colonization supervision and especially from Bureau of the Million Wonders of the Universe to rescue Tinni colonists. Politics says we must rescue them or else.

To Crux Orbit 1 Terra: I incomprehend problems of rescue of Tinni colonists.

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Damn right you lack background. No one can land on Tinni because charge field will not allow entrance of objects more complex than dia-

atomic elements. Covalent bond chemically. Five terran years were spent on charge field breakthrough research with animals and devices. Only success was device which managed to get through and home in on generators of charge field. If device is working properly it should be attracting human colonists of certain cortex wave emissions to generators in hope that colonists will tinker with generators and drop charge field. Meantime we plan to send out new device controlled by volunteer pilot. Volunteer is brother of stranded Tinni colonist. Pray or something.

To Crux Orbit 1 Terra: Excuse persistence on my part. Curiosity. Is charge field high or low around planet and are colonists advanced scientifically?

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Is low. Field uses mountains as conductors of generators and Tinni core energy. Are devanced. Colonists still use animal transport and because planet is hot inhabit sub T cities. We can suspect further scientific devancement because of Judician factor in Tinni culture.

To Crux Orbit 1 Terra: Curiosity. Why was Com Stapleton taken from job as research director of Tinni breakthrough?

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Because five years of recording failures. Mental breakdown of course. So good luck to you. Curiosity. Who's going to pay for this lengthy vacuum discussion? Your background has been costly!

The whudey nuzzled its flared nose into the hot sand, shifting

its weight on heavy feet and scratching its rump on a cactus-reed leaf. It then emitted a sigh of pleasure.

Edmond awoke from his comfortable position on the slope of the animal's largest hump and immediately grew aware of the prickling inside his cranium. It made him want to scream, but he recognized it, and remembered with annoyance and a little terror that this was just the beginning. The mild part.

He just didn't understand this thing in his head. The prickling had occurred over a dozen times before, always growing softer as he neared the Minced Mountain and the metal stalk. After a few days of soothing sensation, the feeling had always stopped, allowing Edmond to resume his search for men and their scalps.

Edmond echoed the sigh of the whudey. This meant that he would have to go back to the Mountain and bear the whole process once again. But first—

He dropped from the equine camel and slashed with a rusty blade at the reeds that had sheltered him from observation the night before.

Slicing off the pulpy, thorned leaves, he gathered the bare stems into a bundle, and resumed his perch on the whudey. The shaping of new reeds should kill enough time to take the monotony from the trip ahead.

Besides the city, the next safest place was the mid-desert, where you could survey 150 square kilometers and no human movement could escape you. Any would-be scalper would be noticed far enough ahead for time to shoot some food, roast it

over a fire and shape any reeds you might need when he finally did arrive. Edmond laughed. If you wanted to live a life of sun and safety, dig a hole or erect a tent right where he was. That is, if you didn't need the pellets in the city; and Edmond doubted that anyone didn't need the pellets sometime.

Wincing at the thought of no pellets, Edmond remembered the violent spasms that had hit him when he had waited too long without them.

The prickling continued and Edmond found himself automatically scratching his head as if for fleas. Everything was becoming more and more incomprehensible as the days passed. Especially his memory: it was as if he had been born with plush facial hair—his memory extended back no further than that.

The more he thought about it consciously, the more Edmond found that something had drained importance from his life. There was constant depression—perhaps because there was no memory of a past life on which to base the degrees of happiness. Or was the depression merely from his lack of understanding of the world?

No significance to life . . . except a pride in that respect for fair-play in most men. Respect that did not belong to a degenerate world of blood and pellets.

Perhaps he didn't belong either—he had that respect.

Swishing its forked tail to ward off insects that had accompanied it from the city, the whudey began

to blink in a twitch. It gazed out across the desert. Edmond rose in the slick saddle and observed that his whudey stood on the border between a barren land peppered with individual weeds and plants, and that hypnotic world of animated sands.

Like the whudey, Edmond wanted to blink the sandy inferno away; but it was there with him, as were the innumerable pins under his skull. He felt like splitting open his cranium and scratching.

The whudey half trotted, half loped toward the large speck that called Edmond to the horizon.

The area around the well was quite exposed from attack from the nearby rocks, but both man and beast needed water. This time, Edmond had to be optimistic.

He again parted the hair hanging in his face and stared into the water-hole. It was too narrow, too smooth and deep to have been dug by shovels, and it looked old. A glance at the well caused Edmond to think of the sky that seemed to rest on the mountains, but he dismissed the association for its pointlessness.

If he could only remember back, things would be clear.

Having pulled the twin water bags from the whudey's lower hump, he lowered them simultaneously into the well and awaited the splash.

When it did come, so did a human shadow to his right.

Fool! he shouted silently to himself. So busy meditating, he hadn't even bothered keeping the crossbow beside him.

Edmond pretended not to see the

figure watching him, and through peripheral vision searched for an opportune position for a dash to the saddle. He felt foolish. If his would-be scalper had a knife, he would throw it; with a crossbow, he would get Edmond no matter what. A knife, Edmond hoped.

The buzzing of a thousand insects made Edmond unconsciously look to the right. The advancing scalper had also stopped and turned in the direction of the sound:

Behind the scalper a flat metal circle skipped across the dunes, and dipped toward him. It couldn't be possible, but Edmond thought he could see the Exchanger's face on the circle—which was now resembling a platform—and beside it another face, gray, unfamiliar.

The passengers of the flying platform saw the scalper without noticing Edmond, who flattened himself behind the scattered rocks around the well. The platform dipped again and flashed by the dumbfounded scalper. The rim of its floor struck his head, and he staggered, falling. One temple began to shine red in the sun.

After a last dip for inspection of the lifeless human, the platform was gone.

### III

There had never been death like that before: machine against man, and Edmond tried to shake it away with a shiver of his shoulders. There had been no battle at all—but a man had been killed. In such murder there was no respect for equal

opportunity, no respect for Man the Fighter.

And Edmond knew the platform would have killed him, too, had it seen him.

Freeing the body of its scalp was messy and slow for Edmond. A sloppy job; Edmond realized he was disturbed by small nagging notions in his head. Too many confusing things were happening lately. The platform, the grayish figure beside the Exchanger, the metal stalk, the Minced Mountain, no memory. He developed a quick headache.

Thank God it wasn't the windy season, he sighed, starting to scale the infinity of boulders—the pieces of the shattered mountain called Minced Mountain.

Edmond Reud craned his neck up the 300 meters of rocks and up the other 300 meters of metal pole. Both mountain and pole didn't belong here. They had not been born with the land; and, with more confusion, they attached themselves to his mind in association with the flying platform that had seemed to be traveling from the city in the direction of the Mountain.

The prickling had waned slightly with each step up the mountain. By now it was soft and satisfying, but Edmond wasn't satisfied.

It would take him at least ten days to search the shadows of the boulders for whatever was calling him with the prickling and whispering in his head. But assuming that the closer he got to it, the more soothing the prickling would become, the search would neither be impossible nor unbearable.

The whudey would not accompany him. Edmond would have to find a place for it and hope the animal didn't snort and betray itself if anyone came near.

No — something besides hope could be done about the snorting.

An oblong boulder rested on a low cliff and another long towering rock, forming a natural stall. Edmond led the reluctant animal into the crag's darkness, allowed the whudey five drinks of water, and then tied a piece of rivul skin around its head loosely, but so that it would permit no braying or wheezing. The whudey stood quietly, completely subdued; Edmond gave it a reassuring pat between its silky ears.

Edmond started and stared at the water bags. He hadn't noticed that before . . . or had he? The two bags were not animal skin, and what they were, he didn't know. He sighed a second time, as he realized that as the metal platform associated itself with the Minced Mountain in his mind, so did these water holders — which were blue, slick and easily wrinkled — associate themselves with the city, the metal and crystal city lights, and human beings.

Two categories of life seemed to be forming in his mind.

Logic told him that whatever called him at intervals was not natural, so he wondered to himself what it would associate itself with when and if he finally reached it. He made its discovery his goal — something important to life — even though he was tired of the whole situation; and he made curiosity his stimulus.

Since there was no wind to erase his footprints, he tore a large brush from a crevace and swished it in a fury on the ground at the mouth of the whudey's "stall" and across his own tracks as he proceeded toward his goal.

On the rocks he would have no worry of being tracked . . .

No worry of being tracked, unless, as he realized after a few hours of scrambling and frequent slipping, he left a trail of blood. With knuckles torn and screaming quietly in agony from repetitious scrapings, Edmond strove toward the sky, noticing an ever so slight change in the sensation on his brain. Were there any others being called to this place, or was he alone? If there were, they would be trying to stay hidden from his vision, so he shouldn't expect to see anyone in any case.

Edmond fumbled. His crossbow clattered against the gray rock; a few reeds rolled out and fell down the slope. He swore and for the first time allowed himself to stand and to stretch, a perfect target for any weapon nearby. He just could not go on without breaking the monotony for his legs and back.

The pole glittered above him. Edmond couldn't analyze his deduction logically, but his eyes told him that the pole touched the "sky" as did the mountains to the east and west. Perhaps it was the minute dark tops that made it seem so.

Whatever it was, Edmond felt trapped on earth. Mixed emotions flashed over him with each attempt

at deep thought, so he did as little as possible.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see the ominous boulders around him. This was a new inferno of gray and the bleached and the yellow-white heat of the sky.

Four days had passed, and nothing . . . Cut and festering hands and shins took all annoyance from the dust that covered his skin.

With a groan he stretched again, and then stopped. An inky darkness different from the usual gray shadows stared at him ten meters away.

Darkness meant depth, and depth was seclusion and mystery. His hopes were increased as the mind-prickling decreased even more.

Half falling, he rushed into the mouth of the cave, and cried out as he almost collided with a man seated on the floor. Edmond stared, heart sounding in his ears. The man's leg was bent at an incredible angle, and what of the man's skin that could be seen through caked dirt was pale and creased. Edmond had seen similar skin once before. Pale and wrinkled from need of pellets.

Normally Edmond would have killed the man automatically, but he was not out on the desert now; he was in the unnatural Minc-ed Mountain, and he found it easier to ally himself with the cripple than with his environment.

Neither spoke. The man on the floor probably awaited death at Edmond's hands. Edmond awaited an explanation.

Rows of small metal containers on

wooden shelves stretched back into the cave. Edmond again sensed that these were related to the city and not to the flying platform.

Confusion was mounting — with frustration, and impatience.

"I'm not going to kill you," Edmond said, then felt the absurdity of the statement.

The man's face upturned. His snarled hair and beard were graying. Lord, he was old, Edmond realized with a start. Edmond had only seen one other *old* man before, a thousand or more days before, the body lying dehydrated and scalped in the desert.

"Speak. What is all this?" Again his words sounded foolish, but his words could only echo his thoughts. One seldom found occasion to talk these days. These days? Had there been time before when one had found occasion to talk a lot?

The old man was quiet, staring at Edmond.

"Sit down," he finally commanded tiredly, and Edmond did so, lying his crossbow aside without hesitation. "You really want to know? You are curious?"

Edmond nodded.

The old man mumbled something about hope, and sighed. "Then I will tell you and you will have to listen long. There's a lot to say. But since you want to know . . ."

Edmond awaited, finding himself momentarily envisioning the old man, Edmond himself and the whole situation a bit insane. The old man whispered to himself, seeming to chose and arrange the words he would use. Edmond wanted to scream

at him to hurry and say something, anything, to break the craziness of the moment.

#### IV

“I am, I think, Richard Cordaro. My leg,” the old man said, stroking it as if it were a separate animal, “was broken badly and it’s been this way for I don’t know how many hundred days. I fell into the cave from a scuffle on the rocks above the cave’s opening. It was the second guy who tried to kill me while I had been in the cave. You’ll find their skeletons somewhere outside, and their animals’ somewhere, too. Probably starved to death.” The old man was almost babbling. “I can only crawl and I can barely even talk. I’ve wanted to talk so much, but no one to talk to all that time. I remember I came here because something called me in my head.”

As Edmond’s eyes jerked in recognition, the old man nodded heavily. “I thought that is why you’re here, too. Later we might talk about what calls us here. We have time.” He cleared his throat, and resumed. “Since there was nothing for me to lean on to get out, I haven’t left, but nor do I want to.”

The old man gestured at the metal containers. “I have all the food and water I need. Brought them here from a storage room in the city. So much stuff in that room, but I broke my leg and got stranded here before I could bring it all here, to my home, the place that calls me so much.” Trying to pull himself

along, the old man began to move toward the shelves.

Scrambling to his feet, Edmond motioned him to stay still. He felt a new respect — or a pity — for this man named Cordaro. “Do you want some of the containers?” Edmond asked.

The old man nodded again.

It looked like water in the crystal containers, Edmond observed as he sat metal and crystal ones down before Richard Cordaro, who pulled a rusty metal thing from a cranny in the wall. This new metal thing was related to the containers and the city, came the immediate analysis from Edmond’s subconscious.

With a few jerky motions from the old man’s hand, one of the metal containers was opened and wonderful odors hit Edmond in the face.

“Go on — have some,” Cordaro said. “There’s enough for an army here.” He shoved the container toward Edmond, who wrinkled his nose and stuck his fingers into the food. The moisture of the stuff was pleasantly cool to his mouth.

With food floating in his jowls, Edmond still managed to blurt, “You do have food and water, but how do you get any pellets. How long have you lacked them? I have some if you need —”

“God no!” the old man interrupted. “Let me go on explaining. No more pellets, ever! I —”

“But look what’s happening to your —”

The old man interrupted again, “I asked you to let me go on.”

Edmond was silent.

“I have a bad memory.”



Again Edmond started, but said nothing.

“I have a bad memory, but I can remember everything that has happened to me since I stopped swallowing the pellets, a long time ago, many memories ago. The pain of no pellets was bad for twenty days, but it left . . . You can't remember that far back for yourself. But then you have been eating the pellets; they have everything to do with a man's memory.” Cordaro stared into Edmond's face.

“And I think it is because I haven't had the pellets that I can remember faint things that happened before I first took the pellets. I've written those feelings and memories down on the racks I built to hold up the food.” He pointed to a wooden board holding up the shelves. “Would you mind reading them to me, and to yourself?”

As Edmond neared the inscriptions, he saw they were numbered. “Number one: ‘There is something wrong in the world, for there are no flying animals in the sky.’”

“Stop,” Cordaro motioned to him. “Have you noticed that?”

After a thought back into what of his life he could remember, Edmond agreed. “Yes, I suppose. The only one I did see, fell to pieces when it flew too high. It hit the sky . . .”

The old man smiled for the first time. “It hit the sky. The sky is very close; you've noticed that, too. Read the next one.”

“There is something wrong in the world, because my mind tells me

that at night there should be moons and stars in the sky.” Edmond's mouth fell open slightly. “Stars” and “moons.” As soon as the two new words appeared in his mind, he knew the statement was correct.

“Go on,” Cordaro said.

“There is something wrong in the world, because my mind tells me that someone is trying to get into the world.” Edmond had never felt that; he read on, “Number four: ‘There is something very wrong, because my mind tells me someone is trying to kill all men in the world.’”

Edmond stopped himself. “Of course!” he announced in a frustrated voice. “Men are trying to kill men.”

“Yes, but why?” coached the old man.

“For pellets. They're a necessity.”

“Not to me.”

“But the pain, and your skin . . .”

“I have no pain now. The pellets are a habit out of men's weaknesses.” Cordaro closed his eyes to think. “And as you yourself know, the pellets hurt your memory.”

Edmond read on without urging: “There is something wrong in the world, for my mind tells me that men shouldn't forget things as they do.”

All at once these new revelations were too much for Edmond's brain. He sank to the floor and put his face in his hands.

“You don't have to accept it all.” said the old man. “But don't discard it all, either. Try to fit it into your own logic and observations. And please listen to the next two

words with all you have." Richard Cordaro then proceeded to succinctly pronounce: "Beautiful women."

A feeling of contentment and appreciation followed as Edmond heard the two words. He told Cordaro his emotions.

"Your feelings about women are mine," Cordaro remarked. "But remember the sign in the city tells us to kill them for pellets. Our happiness and contentment at the thought of women cannot be a freak of opinion and thought, so most men must feel the way we do. And still the sign says kill women! The Exchangers are men, so basically they must feel as we do. There must be something behind the Exchangers, scalps and pellets, which is not Man."

Edmond discovered himself *thinking*, for the first time in his memory. "You're assuming too much," he objected. "You're not being logical because you just dismissed the possibility of *the two of us* being freaks. Aren't we the only ones being called to the mountain. That's freakish. And you can't dismiss the possibility of the Exchangers being freaks either."

"I see the reasoning in your arguments. My 'logic' is based mostly on memory feelings, and I'll have to be shown one way or another that we, and not the pellet-bounties offered on scalps, are freaks to this world, before I'll abandon my feelings. I know of men who have killed women for the pellets, men who would rather do that than bear pain, but still they've had good feelings deep inside for women. They are

merely men without respect and pride, I think." The old man was calm; he seemed tired.

It gradually sank into Edmond. Respect again and again. "Yes . . . I won't forget that, no matter what else the pellets make me forget. I will remember the respect." Edmond started to move toward the outside, "I'll have to return to the city before I can have any peace in my mind. I want understanding."

"A minute, please . . . your name?" Cordaro asked.

"Edmond Reud."

"Edmond, go to the writing on the shelves again, and read the two columns of words you missed. Cover the right-hand column with your hand, read the left-column words to yourself, and then read the right column."

"Tinni," Edmond read to himself. He had never heard the word before — never before in what life he could remember, so he could not know what it meant. But the word "Tinni" made him feel proud and close to whatever Tinni was. Edmond looked at the right-hand column.

Eight words were etched there: "The feeling of being near and dear." Exactly what Edmond had felt. He closed his eyes; the old man, he concluded, was right about the wrongness of loss of memory.

The next word, or two words, was "Earth-Terra". "Earth" brought nothing, but "Terra" filled Edmond's mind with the memory sensation of something far away, watching him always, somehow.

The corresponding sentence in the right-hand column said: "Far away, but important."

The third word: "Starship." An admiration - pride - fear - awe - joy slapped him immediately across the brain, and the corresponding sentence turned out to be the words "Pride and Power".

The last word — no, there were eight words. Edmond's heart rocked inside his chest. It kicked and pushed him. The words were: "Death of Tinni and all men on Tinni."

With a cry, he collapsed and moaned. Depression-honor-sense-of-inequality-futility-terror swept over him, flogging him.

Edmond was panting when he finally rose and stared at the old man — the prophet, the wizard of words. Edmond understood what Tinni was; he looked at the right column, which said accordingly and appropriately: "More terrible to me than even my own death."

"I hope I haven't given you too much," the old man said. "As I said before, something is wrong in this world of ours. Hold tight."

"I'm going back to the city to find the Exchanger. I'll do something."

"You'll do something," Cordaro mused, "for curiosity. It is so for me also. And also for something more than curiosity . . ."

"Out of respect for men in our world," Edmond said.

"It seems so. I want to know what is happening in the world, because I have nothing else to do. I cannot move, to scalp, and take pellets, as other men do."

"I want to know what is happening," Edmond returned, "because I have nothing else to do except scalp and take pellets, as other men do."

## V

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: You will soon receive communication from Bureau of Million Wonders of the Universe. Watch your step. Do not offend them in any way. Say little at all. Urgent. Bureau is debating whether to support the dismantling of the action dept. Our dept. Pray they don't support it.

To Crux Orbit 1 Terra: Check.

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Double check it damn!

To Bureau of MWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Greetings. Do you desire to talk with Base Roquefort?

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Of course. This is interview for Bureau of MWU Terran monthly bulletin. Very important that you have answers to questions. We desire to know what is being done to open planet Tinni. We have interest in developing Tinni into monument dedicated to colonist tenacity in overwhelming odds if Tinni colonists are still alive. If colonists are not alive then a monument for those brave colonists who died serving mankind. Clear?

To BMWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Yes clear. In fifteen hours a volunteer brother of Tinni colonist will leave Base Roquefort in latest ship developed and will attempt breakthrough of Tinni charge field. Volunteer is necessary for manual control because at from twenty five to

one hundred kilometers field has unknown effects on electrical expansion devices used for countering charge field.

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Good. We sincerely hope success. We know you're doing your best. You may know that we will certainly support continuation of your dept. If you're successful in this problem.

To BMWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Thank you.

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Never waste dept. funds with a thank you response. We desire to know what are possible touristic points of Tinni that could be developed on Tinni by our bureau.

To BMWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Don't really know. Perhaps Judician generators which are presently supplying energy for charge field from Tinni core. Or perhaps the device that broke through charge field and homed in on generators and is now attracting colonists to generators by cortical wave irritation. Clear?

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: No. But no matter. We meant any cities etc.

To BMWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Sorry. Underground cities. Very primitive. Would the fact that the colonists can't see the moons of Tinni or the stars because of colloidal suspension of atmospheric particles in charge field make good playup point for bulletin?

To Base Roquefort Orbit 24 Tinni: Very good. Primitiveness will get tourist sympathy. So will no moons nor stars to light up the nights. One more point for human interest in

bulletin. Please give name of volunteer who will try to break through charge field and enter Tinni. Also when.

To BMWU Ship Trajectory 2677: Volunteer will try to take ship through charge field as near generators as possible. Name is Samuel Cordaro brother of colonist director three Richard Cordaro.

Edmond slapped his whudey fiercely, and then calmed himself feeling foolish for taking his frustration out on the animal. He spoke to it with softer words, talking at the same time to himself about respect, Cathy, Tinni, Heaven and Hell.

Once again the Minced Mountain rose behind him. Night was approaching cancer-like from the west, and the flame-red sunset encouraged his anger at the Exchangers and at whomever or whatever was offering the bounties on scalps.

Edmond Reud searched the sky for stars and moons. None, of course. No, there did seem to be one. A sparkling white fire spot. But stars were not supposed to grow larger as you watched them. In a few seconds this spot was greatly larger, and then in a shower of light it stopped increasing. It glowed for a moment, seemed to wax in brilliance, and shattered into pieces, which, Edmond noticed in surprise, began to grow larger themselves. The pieces were falling to earth.

He sent the whudey galloping toward the likely spot where the broken "star" would strike the world.

Some hunks were large. Some small. Some metal and some meat. All the meat was in small chunks.

"There is something wrong in the world, for my mind tells me that someone is trying to get in." Edmond remembered the prophet's words. Did "get in" mean by foot or by whudey from a world on the other side of the "sky". No . . . not by foot or whudey. By platform then? Perhaps.

The "star" must have been a flying platform or something. The immediate conclusion that came to Edmond's mind was that the meat pieces were of a flying animal that had hit the platform. It would have had to have been a big bird to shatter a platform, wouldn't it? The pieces of both were so scattered around an extensive area that Edmond could not judge the respective sizes.

He gathered dry bushes, molded them into a ball, and retrieved an armful of meat pieces. They would taste good over a fire, he thought as he lit the brush with a match. He looked at the miniature torch in his fingers as it burst into flame, and began to think — where did it come from? —but was distracted by thoughts of the taste of flying animal.

Edmond inhaled the aroma of the roasting meat and suddenly a chill made him nauseous. His appetite left and he could only think of the new words and emotions in him. The chill hit him again.

As he mounted his animal, the pieces of meat were burning, some turning to ash. Edmond didn't look

back. He no longer felt the pieces of meat were from a bird.

Jakesu was gesturing wildly and shouting, as Edmond entered the room behind his back. Jakesu, wild and carefree manhunter, couldn't still be alive! But he was there, and his beard was graying. Edmond smiled to himself and started to shout a hello, and hesitated.

The city rooms were all small, and this one was cramped with wide-eyed listeners, so at first Edmond had not seen what his boisterous friend was holding up. One of the listeners moved aside and Edmond could then see the odd gray scalp dangling in Jakesu's hand. The same gray color as had been on the flying platform with the Exchanger.

"They cannot be men, or they would not want to kill women." The old man's thoughts again returned to Edmond. A flame began to roar inside Edmond.

Pushing and shouting louder than anyone, Edmond Reud made his way to the scalp. "Where did you get that!"

Jakesu turned. "Edmond! Best friend among many friends." He winked. "You mean this fine scalp? A strange one, no?"

"Yes, of course. Where did you get it?" Edmond was frantic.

"Well . . ." he pulled Edmond over to the side of the crowd, which had turned its attention to another teller of tales. "I'll let you in on my fortune. There's more where this scalp came from. I heard the clattering and saw a hundred of them near that broken-up mountain."

Edmond wasn't sure that Jakesu could be trusted, but he had no choice really. "Well, old friend," he said, forcing a smile to match Jakesu's jovial mood, "we should show this scalp to the Exchanger."

"Just what I was going to do. How many pellets do you think?"

As Edmond threw the scalp to the floor, the Exchanger cried out and fell backward. Edmond grabbed him by the neck, shaking him, and motioned back Jakesu, who was stepping forward. "I'm not going to hurt him. Wait here," he told Jakesu impatiently, "while I ask him some questions."

The pale Exchanger's form was limp in Edmond's hands, and became limper when Edmond shouted, "You recognize this scalp! It belonged to that thing in the platform with you, didn't it? It was flying beside you when you killed that man with the platform!"

The Exchanger began to whine, but Edmond went on, finding no sympathy for him, "Jakesu says there are others with scalps like this. They're not human are they! They are not men," Edmond sneered, "but they offer the damned pellets so men will kill each other. They aren't men — no respect for the men and women we are. You are the same as they are, pellet peddler. I should vomit the pellets in your face."

The Exchanger's eyes lolled and breathing slowed. Edmond let him fall.

"Jakesu, I've forty pellets. You'll have them if you guide me to the other gray scalps, but I don't plan

to take any scalps." Edmond almost pleaded, "Believe me, I'm not interested in them, in scalps or pellets. It's what's under the scalps."

Jakesu looked at Edmond, puzzled, "You're not interested in pellets? You're crazy! You'd die if you didn't have them. You can say you don't need pellets now because you're not in pain, but men change once they're outside the city and feeling the cramps and shakes."

"No," Edmond sighed, "I know someone who doesn't need pellets. He is alive, he isn't in pain, and he has a memory which we don't. And he is a *man!*"

"Forty pellets . . ." Jakesu looked thoughtful, even though still confused.

"Forty pellets," Edmond repeated. "But as you said, men change once outside the city. I'll give you the pellets *after* we've arrived at the gray-scalp things."

## VI

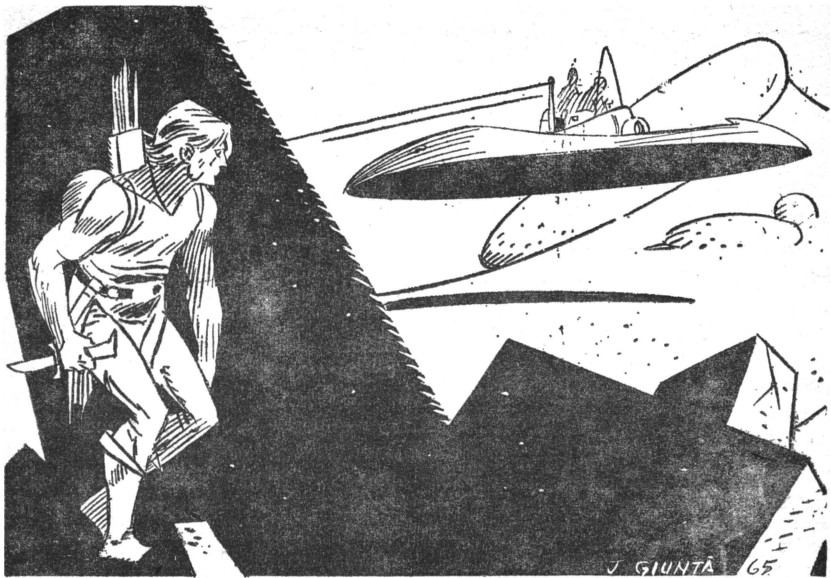
Both whudeys pounded the ground with bristly hooves, and the men grunted rhythmically from the jolts. Edmond hurried them on.

He glanced to the left and saw the metal stalk and Mountain near. If Edmond had to, he would be able to reach Cordaro quickly.

Jakesu was quiet and fidgety, always falling behind. Edmond could see the doubt in his colleague's face.

"There!" Jakesu finally pointed to an abrupt dip in the desert, surrounded by infrequent large boulders.

Why had he never come by here



before? Edmond wondered, and then noticed the deep gorges between the Minced Mountain and the dip. Only a long exaggerated route would allow men to get here from the city or the Minced Mountain because of the gorges. For Edmond it had always been direct travel between the Mountain and the city, back and forth, as both the Mountain and the need for pellets had called him in turn.

Both men dismounted and crept behind one of the rock giants that spotted the area.

The mind-prickling and tingling was starting again. Edmond cursed.

Up close, the dip was not really a dip, but rather an immense natural hole in the desert. Seven meter high cliffs were the walls of the hole. A cave opening—twice the

size of the one where Edmond had found Cordaro—blackened the far end of the hole.

Edmond squinted. Gray figures scurried here and there; and the flying platform rested near the cave entrance.

“Jakesu, how did you get down there?” It was hard for Edmond to whisper when he wanted to shout.

Jakesu stared at him in puzzlement again, and shook his head slowly. He reluctantly pointed to a natural shelf on the cliff near the cave opening. “I slipped down to that, and roped the gray-scalp one when he was getting off that round metal contraption.” Jakesu hesitated, but then went on. “Rivul skin rope is strong. I hauled him up to the ledge, and killed him. He’s probably still there. Rotting.”

It took fifteen minutes to move from boulder to boulder and to the cliff edge above the shelf without being seen.

Edmond turned to the graying beard behind him. "Here are the forty pellets." He shoved them into Jakesu's hand. "I'm going down there now. If you want, you can join me." Edmond fitted a reed into the crossbow, and shifted it to his right hand.

Jakesu said nothing at first, but then began moving toward him. "You must be crazy." Jakesu seemed determined. "All your talk, crazy talk. Edmond, I can't chance you messing up this set-up; it's a fortune in pellets. Don't go down there, please." Jakesu had lost his humor.

Edmond glared at him, silently, and Jakesu advanced, facial features contorting as he grabbed at Edmond's neck.

Edmond Reud dropped the crossbow, grasped one of Jakesu's elbows and sleeve, rolled back, sank a foot into Jakesu's stomach, and pitched a bewildered Jakesu over the ledge.

The scalper's spine cracked loudly as Jakesu struck the ledge and continued falling.

The gray non-humans dashed about clumsily, as Edmond hid.

Without being noticed he slipped down to the ledge, and shot five of the creatures with reeds. A high shrilling, seeming to come from their own mouths, trailed after the fleeing forms. Edmond found an opportunity to drop down the last four meters of cliff wall.

Legs aching from impact, he retrieved the reeds, wiped off the almost "human" blood and entered the cave at a run.

About twenty of them stood there, motionless. Edmond killed two, but, seeing that they were not about to attack, stopped and cautiously walked through them.

Something hit him from behind, but he was ready and he turned, swinging a fist. A cranium caved in under his hand to Edmond's surprise and the lifeless body of the brave gray-scalp thing fell back into the group. It had been so soft. So weak. Edmond shuddered . . . and surprised himself by turning and taking out his insecurity on the creatures that huddled before him.

The blood from the twenty non-humans was so thick on the reeds he didn't even bother to clean it off.

The animals at his feet, he concluded, were neither especially intelligent nor physically strong. They had seemed to be merely doing the work and not supervising it when Edmond had first seen them. He couldn't believe that they were the bounty offerers. He knew, as he seemed to know so many other things lately—perhaps through a life he couldn't remember—that these creatures were but the slaves or servants of the real bounty offerers. What Edmond wanted was not the "slave", but rather the "slave-owner", and if the slaves were at work, the slave-owner would be at rest. In the cave . . .

The Minced Mountain still called, but he remembered an obligation to



Tinni. He wanted to find those who were for "the death of Tinni and all men." His goal had changed, he realized; or had it?

Someone coughed. Edmond whirled in the semi-darkness and watched a second Exchanger he had seen in the city, amble by unaware.

"Traitor." Edmond whispered hoarsely. The caves echoed slightly.

The Exchanger's knees bent, as he almost collapsed against the cave wall. Quickly Edmond slipped a reed from the bundle and pressed it hard against the man's throat. "I won't kill you now," Edmond announced, "if you tell me enough, and 'enough' is everything you know."

The man squirmed under the reed; Edmond let up a little.

"I've taken the pellets," Edmond spoke again. "So I don't have much of a memory, but I know enough to know when you're lying." He pressed down on the reed.

A gasp, and then slowly: "I could not help it." The Exchanger seemed to fall apart, eyes watering. "Do you know what a Judician is?"

Edmond felt the word "Judician" and the gray things he had just killed associate themselves. He nodded.

"The Judicians put the field around Tinni. Then the Judician Centurion — the commander of the weak ones — found me wrecking their weapons. I managed to get to all the weapons except one, but they couldn't use it. They're too weak and disorganized to get it on the sand foil and move it."

As each new word was spoken, it became old and fell into place in Edmond's mind. Pieces of memory filled his head with a light and a confusion.

The Exchanger mumbled on, pathetically, even to Edmond. "They kept me a prisoner in the cave. I had to eat what they gave me — I didn't know it was a narcotic, that it would give me hallucinations. They ate it, too, so I didn't have any idea I would get addicted. Please believe me!"

"And the pellets you give men are narcotics, too?" Edmond had a grim line for a mouth.

The Exchanger nodded slowly. "But the pellets they made me hand out to men make human beings lose memory association. The Judicians had studied the effects of narcotics on men a long time before. They knew men would kill each other to get the pellets, if they put a pellet price on a human scalp, and made men forget most of their lives. The Judicians are trying to kill all men on Tinni. They have high prices on women's scalps so we won't reproduce — so we'll die off. I didn't know what the Judicians were doing until too late. I couldn't do anything about it. The Centurion said I wouldn't get any more of their food if I didn't start the pellets around, exchange them for scalps after men were addicted and turn the scalps I got into him. I haven't killed anybody like everybody else has." The Exchanger was panicking. "Even you've killed a lot of men. I couldn't help it. Even if I had refused the Centurion and died,

the Judicians would have found someone else to take my place as an Exchanger. You want to live, too. I didn't want to die." The Exchanger's voice was at a ridiculously high pitch when he finally stopped.

Edmond looked at him, feeling empty of most emotion. "You wouldn't have died . . . but you didn't know that . . ." Edmond realized he was half talking to himself, but didn't care. "I should kill you and the other Exchanger. I should throw your scalps at the feet of the Centurion, but I am too sick of you to touch you."

The Exchanger was in a pile on the cave floor, and Edmond stood over him. "What is the metal stalk on the shattered mountain?"

"It's the conductor for the charge field generators inside the mountain. It holds up the field."

"Why," Edmond asked, "didn't you go to it and try to wreck or turn off the generators?" He didn't listen for an answer. The Exchanger would say something about the Centurion having the food he needed and that he would have died if he hadn't gotten the food.

Edmond began to shutter. He needed pellets. There were some on Jakesu's body, but he loathed to touch it. He swore at the pellets along with the continuous mind-prickling that added to the torture of frustration and advancing pain. Now was not the time to be disabled by spasms and cramps . . .

He had to find the Centurion.

**A** rhythmic sliding was coming down the passageway of the

cave. Edmond set the reed delicately in his weapon and waited.

The Judician Centurion rumbled incoherently when it saw him. Its massive stomach, which was being pushed along on a leathery callous, bounced to a stop.

"Greetings!" cried the alien, and Edmond laughed with a new hatred. The thing was completely non-human.

Edmond retorted, "Is death worth greeting?"

He followed the thought of the Centurion's brain when the Judician said, "I will give you anything you want. You will sit alone above all men in the world. I am strange and powerful, so I can give you all that you want—even those little round things you need so badly. I—"

A gurgling interrupted. Edmond shot the reed at an angle through the soft belly, and reloaded the crossbow. There was a thump as he sank another shaft into it beyond sight.

Without warning, Edmond was enveloped from behind. He only had time to scream once and see the face of a second Centurion looking down at him with long thin lips.

The sides of the cave room dripped minerals, and were encrusted with a rainbow of colors.

A syrup seemed to be flowing through Edmond's stomach. He glanced sideways at the second Centurion, which was holding some long pellet in its multi-segmented fingers and was attempting a human smile.

Edmond recognized the pellet as one like the Exchanger in the city had swallowed and the kind of pellet the other Exchanger had just talked about as being a hallucination inducer.

Edmond was prepared when the syrupy feeling swelled and the hallucinations began . . .

When the hallucinations passed, Edmond didn't want to think about them. They had involved death of Tinni and all men, over and over again.

He realized how stupid he had been to assume the existence of only one Centurion just because the Exchanger had mentioned only one.

No worse error could have been made. And within only a few hours of success. All it would have taken to open the skies and save what was left of Tinni was a quick ride in the sand foil—it would have been easy enough to control—and then a search of Cordaro's cave for the passageway to the generators. Only a few hours and the sky would have fallen for good.

Edmond kicked himself mentally. He was too excited to become depressed, so crying was not among his plans. Plans? He had no plans!

The Centurion came forward with another pellet. It held a screaming Edmond Reud down with its heavy stomach, poked him in the groin to make him open his mouth wider, and forced the "food" down his throat.

Edmond sprang away, and stuck his own fingers down his throat, vomiting the pellets up. As tears rolled down his cheeks, he cried out in victory. If he could help it, he would not be addicted to another kind of pellet. For God's sake, not another habit!

His actions had stumped the Centurion. It looked so confused—even more confused by Edmond's actions than Edmond had ever been by Judician behavior—that Edmond almost laughed. If the alien could use pellets and hallucinations against him, he could do the same back.

The Centurion sat in front of the doorway and partially closed its eyes. Edmond pretended to sleep, and almost fell asleep before the alien finally let its own lids completely shut.

With a leap from the floor Edmond reached the Judician, grabbed

In the August Galaxy —

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the pellets from its fingers and jammed them down its throat almost to his stomach.

The alien burped terribly, coughed and tried another smile: "Very fine food."

Edmond could have screamed and wept. He feared for his sanity: how absurd could human logic be. If the pellets were alien food, then they wouldn't be a narcotic for the aliens, too. He wouldn't accomplish anything with warped logic, he told himself.

The Centurion still sat blocking the cave-room doorway. Was it waiting for something or somebody?

Edmond decided to make a play on its waiting, if that's what the Centurion was doing.

He shuffled over to a bulge in the rock floor, and braced his foot against it, the squatting alien out of eyesight of the movement.

The Centurion stared at him unblinkingly. Edmond tried to act nonchalant, but then caught himself again. What was nonchalant to a human wouldn't be nonchalant to an alien. Edmond allowed himself to act nervous. It wasn't hard.

"Who's that!" Edmond shouted as loud as he could, and pointed abruptly through the doorway down the corridor's shadows. The alien strained its neck to see, unbalancing itself by resting on a flimsy arm.

Edmond pushed off from the bulge in the floor and toppled the Centurion, mashing its face into the wall. With a kind of joy he trampled its face and neck.

After an exploration of metal sticks and buttons on the sand foil, and a dash across the gorges and desert, Edmond Reud found Cordaro waiting for him at the cave. A quick greeting, and Edmond left the puzzled man as he ran into the intestines of the mountain.

Edmond was awed when there was no great rumbling or bang as he pulled on the generator switch and cut off the charge field around his planet.

## VII

The beardless young man with the straw-colored hair and neat pale-blue uniform announced himself as Lieutenant Commander Charles Finglebower of Base Roquefort, which was presently orbiting Tinni, and that he had come to help Tinni recuperate from its ordeal. Edmond and Cordaro greeted him by the Minced Mountain.

Edmond Reud and the Lieutenant Commander found four hours and forty-seven minutes the minimum length of time to discuss the status of things in general on Tinni and in the Universe. At the end of that time, Edmond's memory had returned to him, in all its beauty. Even the ugly events had a special beauty of presence. His head was bursting with answers to the questions he had carried with him so long. Questions about the well, which the Colonization Supervisors had dug fifty years before . . . the water bags the Supervisors had stocked the city with . . . the tops of the mountains which had

been dark because the force field had obscured them . . .

The Lieutenant Commander mentioned the unsuccessful attempt of volunteer Sam Cordaro to enter the charge field during the night. Edmond remembered with a familiar chill the night when it had seemed a "platform" had hit a "bird" . . . he remembered how he had almost eaten the savory meat scattered around. Edmond grew sick for a moment and realized he would always have a secret from his friend Richard Cordaro. Edmond finally managed a smile.

"Don't worry," said Lieutenant Commander Finglebower. "We have known about the narcotic effect of the Judician food upon humans for just as long as the Judicians. Injections can be given to eradicate the addictions of the colonists. No trouble at all."

Edmond felt a needle slip into his arm, and a woman—a woman!—in pale blue smiled at him.

"I would like to do some of the injections myself," Edmond found himself saying to a surprised Lieutenant Commander Finglebower. "I'll find what men and women are left in the cities and give them the medicine. You could give me the needles and a few light shockers to calm the scalp hunters, and a little instruction for the injections . . ."

Finglebower shrugged his shoulders and nodded, "Fine. The nurse will show you the proper procedure soon. But now I want you to meet a person who'll be very important to Tinni very soon. He's

a representative of the Bureau of the Million Wonders of the Universe, and he wants to talk to you and Richard very much. He'll be out of the ship in a minute."

Something uneasy stirred in Edmond's mind at the memory of the Bureau of MWU. The uneasiness grew. He remembered what the Bureau had done to other planets and *men*.

"We will have a bill passed soon as possible to make Tinni a monument," announced the Bureau representative enthusiastically. "I'll give you the details tomorrow when I bring the big BMWU ship down. Each of the remaining colonists will be given a job as guide or lecturer. Both men and women. Many female tourists—a lot of Suffrage Succeeders—will flock here; and perhaps an artificial lake can be put in to make Tinni a real riviera. Historical, adventurous, wonderful. All adjectives describing Tinni. Can't you see the picture of it now?"

"As a commercialized touristic pot," Edmond retorted.

"Well, there is no dishonor in that, you know. A hundred planets are that way: they show men and women how great Mankind has been and always will be. For instance, Sasham's World . . ."

Edmond didn't hear any more. He began to think about things that were just now returning to him . . . childhood. That was so long ago. The city, when people were working together. Sand being washed out of his hair and ears. Men and

women making another Terra, or at least trying awfully hard. Laughter — perhaps the greatest memory. Pride. Respect for each other, for Tinni.

The Respect towered in his mind.

He remembered sunsets and furry whudeys silhouetted on the deserts. Whudeys with soft humps and flattened noses nuzzling the warm sand.

But as he thought of the BMWU, the sunsets became marred by shapes of a thousand starships. Some fat, some thin, some fast, some sluggish, some looking pregnant, almost in caricature of the millions of people the ships were carrying in their bowels. The BMWU turned the whudeys into animals, laughed at, teased, jabbed, penned up until Edmond's mind screamed.

From a rather omnipotent viewing place high on Minced Mountain, Edmond Reud and Richard Cordaro watched the lone Base Roquefort ship grumble, belch and rise.

Another Tinni sunset was beginning, and there was enough sunlight for Edmond to extend an imaginary hand over the boxes that

the ship had left, with plans of returning the next day with surveyors and with the BMWU ship. The boxes contained shockers, canned food, water to be added to the Minced Mountain stores, needles and serum, and gleaming metal equipment to aid Tinni's renaissance. Edmond nodded the ship a thank you.

He turned with a sigh to Cordaro. "There is something I remember now. It was etched on something long ago on Terra, almost like your words on the shelves. It was a question, and I wish now that I had asked it of the Bureau man: 'Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?' There didn't seem to be any in the Bureau man, or in the rest of them either."

Cordaro looked at him. "They should neither touch nor have Tinni, should they?"

Edmond smiled.

Leaning on Edmond's shoulder, Cordaro hobbled beside him, as they began a walk toward the quiet generator switch. Perhaps in a hundred generations, or whenever someone on Tinni decided to open the field again, Mankind might have changed. Edmond hoped so. END

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# THE CRATER

by J. M. McFADDEN

Illustrated by NODEL

*His real business was insurance.  
But the goings-on in the crater  
had to be everybody's business!*

## I

Johnathon Andrews was working. Two hundred credit marks a day plus expenses testified that Marine Surety Inc. sanctioned his activities and remembered him, at least on payday. Glancing at his watch, he paid the waiter and walked leisurely across the flagstone

terrace behind the hotel toward Waikiki Beach.

The waiter stood looking after him thoughtfully for a moment, then hurried to a small table just behind the door of the inside bar.

"Can I bring you anything else, sir?" He smiled professionally and dried the watermark under an empty glass.

The large man at the table stared at him impassively but didn't answer.

The waiter produced a carved swizzle stick and laid it in the center of the table.

"The beach is beautiful this time of evening," the waiter said, and hustled away into the kitchen.

The large man stood up, looked around the room and brushed against a solitary customer at the end of the bar as he headed out the door. The man at the bar paid no attention, but very shortly he, too, got up and walked out toward the beach.

Through a slit in the shutter of a dressing cabana Johnny Andrews watched the two come single file across the terrace. They looked up and down the nearly deserted beach and then settled into solitary chairs on opposite sides of the terrace.

This hunch is paying off, Johnny thought as he changed into a bathing suit. Hunches are poor substitutes for facts, but there were no facts. At least there were none to justify the expense account Marine Surety's fair-haired investigator had run up the last four days.

Making a down payment on Diamond Head was hardly the conventional route of inquiry into a series of hi-jackings—but these hi-jackings were hardly conventional.

First, the sheer size of the take was like heisting the west wing of Fort Knox. Second, these robberies were happening entirely outside the atmosphere. Third, no one had any better ideas.

Those two spectators on the

terrace were the first indication that someone might be interested in him besides the comptroller back in the home office. Maybe he could follow them home. In any event it was now six forty five and the sight he came to see was due very soon.

He left his clothes in the cabana and stepped out into the soft Hawaiian twilight. Picking a powerboard from the stack beside the cabana, he trotted down to the water.

Johnny was old fashioned and basically disapproved of the cigar-sized power units stuffed into most surf boards nowadays. Any overweight office manager could glide effortlessly out to where the really large rollers broke and usually found them more than he could cope with. Right now, though, a powerboard was exactly what he needed.

The fading sunset had switched on a few dim stars, but most of the sky was still glowing with left-over daylight. The tide was nearly in, but the sea was so quiet that the first thousand yards were only waist deep. He flopped down onto the board and opened the finger throttle half way, heading straight out to sea away from the lights.

About fifteen hundred yards out there was a shallow depression in the bottom where the tall breakers coming from over the night horizon rounded off for a moment before their last long crashing run into the hotel beaches. He stopped the board in this quiet area and twisted over onto his back to watch the northern sky. He checked his watch; two minutes still to go.



Two shipments in a row of high-grade irillium had vanished without a trace. Two more like that and his net assignment would be locating a cheap wholesale source of bulk red ink — and with no expense account.

Marine Surety had become the giant of commercial cargo insurance by backing long shots, but a single shipload of irillium would top the national budget of half the nations on the planet. Somewhere out beyond the fading twilight three more cargoes were inbound.

The first one was due tonight.

His watch showed the time had run down and he concentrated on the north end of the vanishing sunset. Moving slowly, two dim pinpoints of light detached themselves from the afterglow and crawled steadily up the sky growing brighter as they approached the dark zenith.

Guessing right was a profession with Johnny Andrews and this trip looked like a better guess all the time. It had to be here. Out beyond the parking orbit zone a difference of a minute or so in departure time would throw the track of an interplanetary transverse trajectory a million miles either way, but they all had to come down the same chute to get home. This was the chute — the only place a planned intercept really could take place.

The two points of light drew closer together as they reached the top of the sky. Retrofire position to put the cargo ship into the North African docks would be about half way down the eastern sky from

Hawaii, but the two points had merged long before that.

That second ship had made an incredibly accurate rendezvous.

At least he had a starting place now. First, get ashore and confirm with the home office that the company was about one national budget closer to bankruptcy; then find out where those two oversized beachboys went when they weren't lounging around expensive terraces looking ominous.

He paddled the board around to that point in the general direction of downtown Honolulu and used the power switch to move quietly parallel with the swells about a hundred yards to one side of the terrace. Then, staying flat on the board to keep his silhouette low, he opened the throttle and slid into the trough behind the biggest wave he could find.

The board kicked forward leaving a froth of white water which he hoped wouldn't be too noticeable so far out. Very shortly the sea bottom began to shallow and shove the big swell up into a long curling crest of surf that thundered nearly half a mile straight in to the beach.

Johnny hung on with full power, hidden right behind it. With a little luck he hoped the gallery on the terrace would still be gazing out to sea waiting for him to appear sliding grandly down the front of a wave where surf boards belong.

He slid up a backwash of froth onto a stretch of beach where the dark palms grew almost down to the high tide. Just behind the first

row of trees the underbrush was expensively natural. Except for an indignant couple who had bargained for a little more privacy in the shadow of a tree, he thought he was unobserved.

He left the powerboard and slipped into the tangled vegetation.

Nowhere in the world but Hawaii could a man parade through the bushes without clothes in solid comfort. Things that stung, bit or scratched had never been tolerated, even during the brief interlude when the early missionaries had managed to get clothes on the natives.

Staying about ten feet inside the dark undergrowth he felt his way carefully back toward the terrace. Now that he was free of his watchers the next step posed a problem in etiquette. He needed to contact McComb back in the home office in Kansas City to confirm the hi-jacking he thought he'd just seen — and those two interested parties on the terrace needed some serious attention. Knowing who they worked for could save weeks of blind stumbling. But a dripping swimsuit is a bit conspicuous after dark, even in Honolulu.

## II

They were still there, sitting stolidly at each corner of the terrace. The heavy one had ordered a drink. Johnny looked him over for future reference. He weighed about 230 and perhaps 40 pounds of it was excess. Even without the fat he'd be barrel-shaped, with a neck that was a visual protest

against the custom of wearing collars. Straight, light brown hair and suit to match — Johnny couldn't get an eye color from this distance, but the layer of flesh on high cheek bones pushed them nearly out of sight anyway.

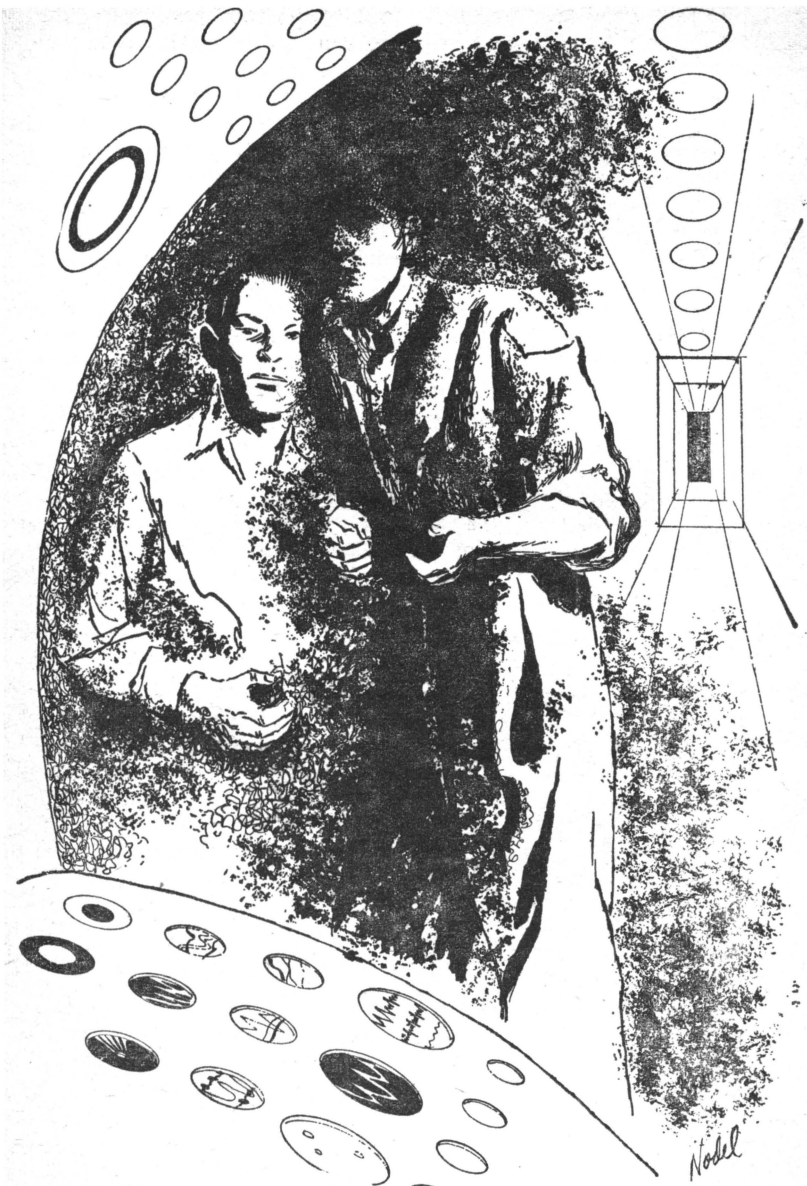
The other man was thin, brunette and faced away from him. His left ear lobe was missing.

Johnny moved back through the tangle of vines to the edge of the side lawn of the hotel where bogavillia had been planted to make certain the guests knew they were in Hawaii. Here, out of sight of the terrace, he marched stiffly across the lawn to the side entrance like any other newly arrived malahini determined to go native comfortably.

Ten minutes later with dry clothes on, the situation appeared much less complex. It's remarkable how a pair of trousers increases a man's self-confidence, he reflected on the way back down the elevator. Simply get a video tape of these two gentlemen and transmit it to the home office. From then on help could be as close as the nearest police station in case he lost them.

He stopped at the terrace bar for some sort of unpronounceable concoction served in a bulky coconut shell. Then he sauntered out onto the terrace holding a pocket-sized tape-camera behind the drink. This was too easy. Just sit down, lean back, take a healthy sip pointed toward each one and they'd be recorded for posterity.

The first sip was the longest. He had cautiously avoided looking



around before he sat down and aiming for the sknny one he got a long picture of an empty chair. He glanced quickly at the other corner.

The big man was still there. He knew the eye color now. So light gray they were almost white, they stared impassively at his peculiar method of holding a coconut shell.

Johnny had two more gulps than he intended before he could get the glass down.

Now what? he thought. If he didn't see the camera, it's his turn next. If he did see it, there's nothing to lose, so it's still his turn next.

He looked blandly around the terrace and then aimed a healthy pull on the coconut shell at White Eyes.

By now the terrace had taken on a misty, unreal appearance that probably had something to do with his hurried draughts from that coconut. He'd watched the bartender insert two kinds of rum, some vodka, raw coconut milk and crushed pineapple and hadn't seriously intended to drink the thing.

He heaved himself to his reluctant feet and ambled across the terrace. There was a not-so-cleverly disguised phone booth near the beach cabanas in the shape of a miniature polynesian temple, from which he could still see the terrace while he called McComb.

Moving around made him feel a little better as he left the lighted terrace to enter the phone-temple from the beach side. It opened on the water so the customers got the

full benefit of the Waikiki surf background roar when they called back home.

He inserted the tape magazine from his camera into the videophone receptacle and turned off the light in the booth in order to see the terrace better. White Eyes had turned around and was looking down across the darkened beach.

"I wonder where his skinny partner went?" he said to himself as he started dialing.

He found out between the fourth and fifth digits. There was a glimpse of rapid motion just behind him and to one side. He whirled directly into a small but thoroughly professional leather sap laid just above his left ear. The last thing he remembered was wondering inanely how this guy lost his left ear lobe when he was obviously left-handed.

The bartender looked up and shook his head in rueful professional pride as he watched his latest Muana Loa Special customer being helped by two friends as he stumbled across the terrace toward the side lawn of the hotel. He signaled a busboy to go out and retrieve the coconut shell.

Johnny had a hard head, but was realistic enough to sit quietly and let it throb when things came back into focus. He was wedged into a tube-car seat designed for two between White Eyes and Lefty. As his vision cleared slowly, he felt the gentle jostle of the capsule-like car as it sped along an airless steel tube a thousand feet below the surface of the Pacific.

Judging from the advertisements around the walls this was one of the inter-island locals that fed commuters and money into Oahu from all the surrounding islands.

Wherever they were headed he didn't have much time because these vacuum cars shot all the way to the last island in the chain in less than twenty minutes.

He began slowly raising a hand to feel his head, but the big man beside him fastened a paw on his arm that felt like a steel claw. Lefty also shifted his weight warningly and he subsided to look around the car.

They were at the rear. It was nearly empty. The commuter rush was over and people in town for the evening were still there. Well, he'd wanted to know where they lived.

"Are you gentlemen always so attentive to lonely tourists?" he ventured.

"We'll talk later, Mr. Andrews," White Eyes rumbled. His voice had a gurgling quality that left the impression that he didn't use it very often. His big hand tightened again on Johnny's arm in a way that left the impression that he used it a lot.

The car began slowing and two or three of the passengers stood up and started back toward the exit at the rear. Johnny and his escort sat quietly until the car stopped, but when the last passenger was out he was hurried to his feet and out onto the platform just before the door hissed shut. The last of the passengers was disappearing up an escalator marked WAILUKU as the

three of them crossed the deserted platform to follow.

The street at the top was not much better. Wailuku may be the "capital" of the island of Maui, but things get pretty quiet in a farm community when the sun goes down. No traffic was moving. They started down the street toward the only sign of life, a forlorn establishment with a single car parked in front. The lighted sign dangling precariously across the sidewalk read, "Fenner's Grill".

"Want me to drive?" Lefty said as they approached the car.

"It talks!" exclaimed Johnny, and then winced from the increased pressure on his left arm from that vice-like hand. His fingers were beginning to numb.

"I'll do it," White Eyes said. "Get in the back and lay him out again if he moves a muscle."

They were in front of the little restaurant now and Lefty opened the back door of the car. Lettering from the last half of a gold sign on the side of the car could be seen on the front door as White Eyes relaxed his grip to reach for the car door. Johnny's arm sagged helplessly, but the other one was still intact.

It's now or nothing, he thought, and drove his good right arm into Lefty's midsection about two inches past the waist. He felt White Eyes clutch at his coat and miss as he whirled away and dove for the door to "Fenner's Grill".

Leaning against the door from the inside he tried to remember whether

there was a special phrase medieval fugitives were supposed to use to claim sanctuary in a cathedral. A small round Chinese bartender sat behind a tiny bar on one side of the room still holding the paper he'd been reading.

"How about a beer," Johnny said finally, nothing else coming to mind.

Outside, he heard the car start and looked back as he walked over to the bar stool. It was a station wagon, he could see now, with a symbol consisting of two concentric circles painted on the side. White Eyes was driving with Lefty slumped down in the back seat. As they pulled away gold letters reading "Crater Ranch" flashed briefly over the symbol in the light of Fenner's sign.

### III

"Are you from the Crater?" asked the bartender handing him a glass. His stiff hair was crew cut to a gray stubble and a heavy un-Chinese beard threatened to westernize his clean shaven plump cheeks.

"No, I'm here on a vacation," Johnny sighed as he sat down and began rubbing some circulation back into his left arm. "What's the Crater?"

"In that case you've found the best Mexican food in the islands. The second booth is empty," the bartender beamed. All of the tables were inclosed in booths with walls clear to the ceiling Chinese style with curtains across the front.

"Thanks — just the beer," Johnny

said. All the booths were probably empty; not just the second one. The place was quiet as a desert. "What's the Crater?"

"We don't often get tourists. They hang around Honolulu and Oahu and never see the real Hawaii," the little bartender pressed a button behind the counter and an even rounder, almond-eyed girl came scuttling from a back room with a clean table cloth and utensils.

"I'm not hungry now!" Johnny protested still rubbing his arm. "What's the Crater?"

"Oh, just a cattle ranch. Did you know the mountain valley you can see right out that window is where it rains two hundred inches a year? There's not any decent Mexican food in Honolulu, you know."

"Where is it?"

"Right in the second booth. Carlotta's bringing your Ming tea. It's our specialty with chalupas and..."

"The cattle ranch. Where's the cattle ranch? I really couldn't eat a thing."

"Carlotta, just bring some tostados to the bar, then," the bartender sighed and opened another beer — apparently for himself. "Haleakala."

"Cheers. Where's the ranch?"

"That's where it is — Ha-ia-a-kala. That's the name of the mountain. Most of my customers are local — a few commuters and lately that crowd from the Crater. Straight across out the front door you can see part of Molokai Island. There's one place there you can see nearly fifty waterfalls at the same time coming down the side of a three thousand foot cliff."

"Then the Crater's new," Johnny tried again.

"Oh no, that's where the whole island of Maui came from. Haleakala's a volcano."

"I mean the ranch."

"Well, the Haleakala crater's been used to graze cattle over a hundred years. It's the biggest volcanic crater in the world about twenty miles across. It's extinct. You can see it right out the kitchen window. Most tourists get sunburned at Waikiki and take a ride over the Pali and think they've seen the islands. You can't get up there now, though."

"To the crater, you mean."

"That's right. Some big outfit leased it last summer and put up a gate house on the only road up the mountain. It's hard to see how they're going to make any money, though. They've hauled almost as many people up there as they have cattle."

Johnny almost congratulated him. It wasn't any harder than extracting a tooth, he thought. Aloud he asked, "Is there a phone booth around?"

"Yes sir. The first booth is a phone booth. The second one is set up for your dinner whenever you're ready. Try a tostado while I get you another beer."

"Thanks," Johnny said, too spent to argue. He took his first beer, still full, and went over to the first booth. Behind the curtains was the glass door of an oversize videophone set-up complete with a chair and small table. He dialed McComb,

wincing instinctively between the fourth and fifth digits.

There was a tapping at the glass as McComb's face appeared on the screen and looked past his shoulder with skeptical disapproval. The little Chinese was still talking on the other side of the soundproof glass brandishing the plate of tostados.

"Just a minute, Mac," Johnny said and opened the door.

"You forgot your tostados," the bartender said. "Tell your friend on Maui it's Fenner's."

"Thank you, he . . ." but the door was closed and the curtains pulled shut.

"It's nice to see a man enjoying his last fling," McComb said drily.

"You wouldn't believe it anyway."

"We just lost another ship."

"I know — I watched."

"From there?"

"Mac, it has to be from here. There's no other place they could make an intercept. Could you see anything on the screen?"

"Maybe. There were some scattered static returns just behind the ship right after it came into range that could have been a merging ship. Anyway it went right by without firing the retro rockets just like the others."

"Where is it now?"

"Vanished. Once they're out of orbit they're gone unless they answer a radio call." McComb looked defeated.

"That's exactly why I'm sure someone's controlling an intercept from here. This is the only place

where a returning ship has to pass through part of a predictable earth orbit in order to hit the dock area. You can't get into the garage without using the driveway. This is the driveway."

"Well, did you call me to recommend the tostados?"

"They're made of poi. We need a check on a skinny black-haired guy about 35 with a missing left ear lobe. He's working with a heavy, brown-haired partner — very light gray eyes."

"Not much to go on. How about a picture?"

"I had one but your phone number's too long."

McComb looked as if he were about to switch off so Johnny hurried to fill him in on the past two hours' activity.

"... so I mean to stay right here until you can round up a sheriff's posse to escort me up to this 'Crater Ranch,'" Johnny finished.

"It won't work," McComb said.

"If it doesn't, I won't work either."

"Johnny, you wouldn't look natural without a fresh lump on your head. The police will agree with them. It's no crime to take pity on a passing drunk. Besides, if there is anything to your idea, you won't find it by parading through the gate with a carload of local police."

"Maybe they know a side door." His sore arm hurt when he tried to feel his sore head with it.

"I'll pass this on to the United Control Authority but they're in such a flap right now it'll be days

before they can get around to it unless we can give them something more definite," McComb said.

"I know it," Johnny sighed. Evidence, nailed down and documented, is what it would take to get the powerful forces of the United Government moving.

"Let me know when you have something," McComb said. "I'll be here at least all night. Where're you going now?"

"To the next booth. Carlotta's impatient."

"Who?"

"It may be noon in Kansas, Mac, but the Hawaiian moon is on the Maui surf. I'll check back with you before midnight your time."

McComb looked resigned and was already reaching for another phone connection when Johnny switched off.

"Why not try a squid taco with your beer?" said the bartender as Johnny disentangled himself from the curtains.

"No thanks. Where can I rent a car?"

"Oh, you won't need to. This is the taxi stand. My cousin, Enrico's out on a long run now though. You have plenty of time for dinner."

"I should have guessed," Johnny said. "Did you say squid?"

"Sure. Carlotta makes them. She says she gets tired of beef."

"Maybe I'd better have that dinner now." It seemed the only way out.

Carlotta popped through the swinging half-door from the kitchen like an animated beach ball and opened the curtains and door to



booth number two. The food was not really as bad as he had feared, although he skipped the tacos. Several attempts to elicit information from Carlotta on a variety of subjects from the Crater Ranch to a shrimp tail protruding from his enchalada resulted only in paroxysms of giggles.

Finally the bartender came over and offered helpfully, "Carlotta was raised the old way, you know. She never learned English until she was twelve and still doesn't speak it very well. We Portugese value tradition—she'll make some one a fine wife."

More titters from the kitchen. "Portugese!"

"Sure. This latin cuisine doesn't come from a can."

"I knew the blood lines had mixed out here," said Johnny, watching the girl clearing the table blushing round and pink. She squeaked another stifled giggle and the dancing eyes all but disappeared in two slanted slits. "I guess I should have noticed the name."

"Yes sir, mine's Manuel." He set a milk-colored liqueur on the table.

Johnny examined the glass dubiously. He needed someone fast who knew the island intimately and this irregular little oriental at least had the advantage of being available. Aloud he said, "A latin accent can be very attractive in a girl."

Another choked shriek came from the kitchen and even Manuel looked surprised. "Oh no. Like all Fenner ladies for generations Carlotta was taught only Hawaiian."

"Like you said, most tourists never get to see the real Hawaii," Johnny said. "When will the taxi be back?"

"Enrico had a fare to a little town on the other side of the island and there's only the coast road because you can't go over the mountain. Another two hours, maybe."

"You must make captives of quite a few customers then."

"Oh no!" Manuel looked really distressed seeing the reputation of his "real" Hawaii at stake. "I only have the delivery truck parked around back, but I'll be glad to take you to our hotel."

Johnny considered a moment and leaned across the table. "Manuel, I'll give you the price of a new delivery truck if you can get me on to the Crater Ranch."

Manuel's oblong eyes seemed to tilt a little more. "I have a delivery to make there tomorrow. My cousin has a food store..."

"I mean now."

"Tonight?"

"You can pick out the truck." He finally had Manuel's total attention.

The little bartender picked up a towel and slowly wiped the already spotless bartop. He inspected a clean glass and set it back on the shelf.

"I got a cousin who has a car agency in Honolulu..."

"Fine, we'll get the best truck he has—custom-made if you like."

"You know somebody up at the Crater?" asked Manuel, watching Johnny intently.

"I just met a couple of guys from

there today in Honolulu. I want to surprise them."

"Carlotta," Manuel called over his shoulder still looking at Johnny. "I have to make a delivery. If any customers come in just serve them and be pleasant."

"She will," said Johnny and an answering squeak floated back from the kitchen.

#### IV

A full moon flooded the island with twilight as they bounced out of the town in a little box-shaped truck with "Fenner's Fine Foods" in faded red letters on the side. Johnny had been prepared for more sales resistance from the little Chinese, but Manuel had not said a word since he told Carlotta they were leaving.

The enormous bulk of the mountain filled the sky ahead as they left the trees of the town behind and rolled through the flat sugar cane fields that filled the sea-level plains. The road sloped upward like a giant ski-jump, but the pitch here was so gradual that it was perceptible only from the laboring truck engine.

After a few miles the cane and the climate switched abruptly. The air was cooler and row after endless row of squat pineapple plants stretched away in all directions. Now Johnny could see the whole island outlined with a necklace of lights around the water's edge. The cane fields and beach made a base barely large enough to hold Haleakala looming above them.

After the pineapple fields, a few scraggly trees appeared that quickly gave way to low bushes and grassland, as the pitch of the slope steepened and the road began to wind. It was already uncomfortably cool when they hit a layer of scattered clouds about two thirds of the way up. Before coming out the top of the cloud, Manuel switched off the lights and slowed to a blind crawl.

"Where are we?" Johnny asked.

"The gate house is about ten miles ahead, but from here on cattle trails go all around the mountain. The floor of the crater is good grazing land, but no grass grows at the rim; so cattle inside never try to get out. There's a trail along here somewhere that'll take us up to the rim about half way around. You'll have to walk from there, though."

They came out of the cloud and the road stretched away bright again in the moonlight. After a few hundred yards, Manuel turned suddenly through the shallow ditch and bound off across an open field broken here and there by huge boulders that towered over the truck.

"I don't see any trail," shouted Johnny over the rattle. He clutched at the side of the cab to stay in his seat.

"Oh sure. Lived here all my life. We used to camp up here when we were kids. Just ten more minutes."

Twenty minutes later the truck bumped to a stop against an outcropping of rock and black lava



that not even Manuel was willing to attempt. The truck sighed and wheezed gently as he shut off the engine.

"Oh well, you're getting me a new one," said Manuel with satisfaction. "Come on," and he got out and started up the lava flow.

"Manuel," Johnny hung back. "This is as far as you go. You must have gathered I'm not an invited guest here."

"But we're not there yet." The little Chinese stopped and looked back.

"This is close enough. Here's your new delivery truck," Johnny said and held out a note he'd scribbled to McComb.

Manuel scrambled back down the rocks and held the note close to read in the moonlight. He looked back at the rim of the crater once or twice and again at Johnny.

"Who's McComb?" he finally said.

"He's an official in the company I work for. That note will make sure your truck goes on my expense account."

"Mr. Andrews, I know those two 'cowboys' you left in front of my place. I got a plate glass window, you know. They've been in before. Even Carlotta stays quiet. They wouldn't know a steer from a wall-eyed fence post."

"If you were watching, why'd you'd come up here? Doesn't Wailuku have any police?"

"Sure, my cousin Roberto. I'll tell him about it tomorrow. Anyway, all I saw was you folding up that skinny guy and by me that's a public service."

"Listen, that big man is no soft touch, Manuel. If you're caught up here with me, you could end up actually looking Portugese. I only want to see what kind of ranch gets hidden on top of a mountain with more people than cattle."

"I *am* Portugese." Manuel paused and looked back past the jutting boulders at the ring of lights around Maui that twinkled up through the scattered cloud layer.

"Mr. Andrews," he said finally, "this is my island. We've been here since 1832 when an Irish ancestor was forced to leave Macao hurriedly. Now four months ago these people just move in, put up gate houses, keep us out of our crater because they say they want to keep their breed pure. Why, this is the only place around here you can get away from that blasted Hawaiian eternal springtime! I'm curious, too."

Manuel slipped the note into his pocket with an air of finality and addressed himself again to the tumbled rocks. His shape appeared designed to portray one of those small oriental gods of happiness in a spring pageant; but he bounced up the rocks like a basketball and Johnny was scrambling to keep up.

They reached the narrow rim without warning and Johnny was not prepared for the sheer size of the view. The slick black lava fell away steeply from their feet but soon became grass as the curve of the gigantic bowl flattened out into a vast meadow broken here and there by dark house-sized cinder cones; mute ghosts of the last an-

cient dying breaths of the long dead volcano.

Gleaming sparsely under the rim to their left, a lonely cluster of lights outlined the main ranch house. A few head of cattle huddled dark and motionless directly below them.

"See. The cattle can't cross the pahoehoe," Manuel said.

"That ought to keep the breed pure."

"Of course."

"Manuel, I just happen to know 'pahoehoe' is slick lava, not a vow of celibacy. Skip the travelogue and let's get closer."

They slid down the hard pahoehoe and started across the grass toward the distant lights. As they moved through some scattered cattle, Johnny noticed that two had lost most of the hair on one side as though from a radiation burn.

About a hundred yards from the lighted compound they were stopped by a huge slab of concrete rising waist high from the ground and extending nearly to the compound. It was painted a dark color they couldn't identify in the moonlight and hadn't been noticeable until they walked up to it. Part way down the length of the slab sat a large pile of cinders looking pretty much like the rest of the cinder cones scattered over the valley floor.

"They over-did the lanai," Johnny said. "Was this here before?"

"I don't remember it. The shipping corral used to be along here."

They moved quietly along the smooth concrete closer to the ranch buildings. About the center

of the slab a series of heavy conduits extended from the edge and disappeared into the ground. At the end nearest the ranch house the earth was dug away to a depth of about ten feet, but the concrete apparently extended deeper than that.

Near one corner of this pit some steps led down to a door in the end of the slab.

Johnny paused part way down the steps where they could still see the ranch buildings, their eyes level with the top step.

"All asleep," muttered Manuel after a moment.

The heavy steel door was held shut by a sliding latch bar but had no lock and opened easily when Johnny tried it. They entered an enormous corridor nearly the length of a football field, dimly lit from panels in the ceiling. The set-up was about what Johnny had expected to find somewhere around the islands, but infinitely larger than anything he had ever heard of.

"What is it?" asked Manuel eyeing the rows of control panels with glowing jewel lights that stretched almost out of sight.

"This is how you de-rail a space ship, my Latin friend. It's the granddaddy of all radars. Those pipes we saw coming out of the slab must lead to an antenna laid along the ground. This whole crater is a giant, dish-shaped radar antenna! It's so big they're using an atomic pile for power. You ever heard of Marine Surety Incorporated?"

"No, I already got insurance. My cousin . . ."

"No matter, no matter. How about irillium hi-jacking?"

"Sure. It's been in all the news for weeks. There was another one tonight." Manuel looked apprehensive. "That what this is?"

"That's exactly what this is." Johnny walked along to the main panel in the center of the corridor. "This monster ought to generate a pulse big enough to overpower a servo-signal five hundred miles away — and the ships are only about a hundred miles up when they come over here on the way in."

"I'm not as curious as I was." Manuel edged toward the door.

"Jus: a minute. I'll leave a calling card." He studied the rows of switches for a moment and then activated the main radar power-on toggle. The power indicator dial next to it stayed dead on zero.

"I thought you only came to look," Manuel said over his shoulder.

"Yes, I'm coming." Johnny lingered at the big central control panel. Manuel was right. He did have what he came for. But Marine Surety didn't pay salaries like his just for information. Besides, there was only one more step.

Along the top of the control panel lay a row of positioning knobs glowing with dull ferocity in the dim light. The row was labeled "Neutron Supress" and the pointer on each knob was turned to "Positive Insert".

Johnny turned one toward "Extract" and a rumbling buzz began under their feet.

"This ought to do it," he said and

quickly flipped all the knobs over to full "Extract".

"Let's do it outside, then," said Manuel already at the door by then.

"We should have at least ten minutes before anything goes," Johnny said stepping through the door after him.

## V

"You ought to have more time than that," said a familiarly hoarse voice from the top of the steps. White Eyes stepped back from the center of the walk where he'd been standing and the moonlight glinted off the snout of a small hand gun almost lost in his over-sized fist.

"Come on up." It sounded almost hospitable.

Johnny followed the small Chinese up the steps with the unhappy calculation that the two of them added together would not quite equal the big man even without the gun.

"How'd you get here, anyway?" White Eyes asked as they reached the top.

"Over the pahoehoe," Johnny said indicating the center of the crater with his thumb.

"The what?" White Eyes glanced out across the crater.

By now they were in front of him. White Eyes was still looking across the moonlit crater from the top of the steps. Suddenly a rumble sounded through the open door they had just left. Reacting fast, Manuel's almond eyes seemed to grow round with fear, and he screamed toward

an imaginary ally, "Run Roberto!"

In spite of himself the big man turned and Johnny was in the air. He planted both feet on the man's left kidney and snapped his legs straight.

It felt like kicking a tree, but White Eyes was on his way down the steps as Johnny landed rolling. It wasn't much of a head start, but it was enough.

Johnny looked for Manuel and found him out in front already rounding the corner of the slab. By the time Johnny drew even with him they had left the slab behind and were racing across the floor of the crater.

". . . can't outrun . . . nuclear blast!" Manuel panted.

". . . won't explode . . . just heat," Johnny began to draw ahead.

". . . then . . . what's the hurry?"

". . . we're on . . . antenna . . . high power . . . before burns out . . . just run!"

**T**hey raced through the motionless cattle, leaving small flurries of startled activity. Glancing back, Johnny caught the flash of headlights turning through the trees around the ranch house and shortly the hum of an automobile engine made a background to their pounding feet.

The car zigzagged in their general direction avoiding livestock and probing with the thin white finger of a spotlight. Johnny, his breath coming now in long gasps was surprised to find Manuel still keeping up.

The spotlight flashed across their

backs, paused and snapped back to flood them with wavering splashing light as the car bounced around to head toward them. Wild arm and leg shadows leapt crazily ahead across the grass until they stabilized in silhouettes against the sharply rising pahoehoe. Only a few steps more.

A sharp snapping sound at his car and splinters of lava erupted from beside his shadow up ahead. Now nearly all the shadow climbed up on the wall of lava as they got closer.

He drove his aching legs with all the strength he had left and watched the ridiculous shadow-dance on the wall like a soldier running in place and getting nowhere.

Another snap near his head and more lava shattered. The rapid tempo of Manuel's drumming feet behind him increased even higher. Manuel took shorter steps but, seeming to have an inexhaustible supply of them, he went by like a motorboat.

The pahoehoe here was cut by deep clefts; and they flung themselves like flying rag dolls into the darkest one.

Suddenly the hum of the car engine stopped. Johnny heard shouts and tried desperately to control his gasping breath enough to hear the words. Manuel lay propped on one arm. "Let's go," he wheezed.

"No, wait. I think it's coming!" Johnny said.

"Well, I don't want it. Let's go," and Manuel started crawling up the crevice.

"I mean we made it. Look!" Johnny was peering back over the edge of the pahoehoe.

The lights were out now on the car where it had stopped about a hundred yards away, shining black in the moonlight. Across the great bowl of the crater stretching away out of sight in the misty darkness wisps of smoke were beginning to appear making regular twenty foot squares as the grass charred black and here and there licked into flame.

"But it's extinct!" Manuel cried.

"That isn't the volcano — it's the antenna! I told you the whole crater is an enormous radar antenna. They just laid cables under the grass. It already had the right shape."

"I never saw a radar antenna do that."

"You never saw one get that much power. We left that nuclear pile out of control and going wild."

There was a flash from the car and bits of flying pahoehoe showered over them. The doors opened and two figures piled out. Johnny and Manuel ducked.

They heard a scream that died away quickly as if the screamer had lost interest part way through. No more shots. Johnny tried another cautious look and saw why.

Now the black lines had all turned red and gave off a bluish glow. In the eerie light the two

figures from the car lay scattered about halfway between the wall and the car. One lay where he had fallen across a cable and the red line of the cable appeared solidly unbroken where his chest had been. The other had dragged himself into the middle of a square; but his legs were ten feet away on the other side of the fiery red line.

A heavy rumble came from the concrete slab which split open with a burst of smoke as they watched. Instantly the glowing checkerboard of the crater went dark.

They crawled up the cleft in the wall keeping as much pahoehoe as possible between them and the crater, Johnny having begun to wonder how much radiation they might have picked up from the antenna display even before the power plant blew.

"The company will kick through with a lot more than just a delivery truck for this night, Manuel," Johnny said as they bumped back down the mountain. The old truck sagged a bit more than it had, but it ran rather well downhill.

"Oh, it wasn't for money. You're just lucky you happened onto me. My cousin Renaldo says in the old days I should have been a sailor. Maybe I ought to go into space. Renaldo says I'm just the adventurous type."

Johnny sighed, "Probably it's your Viking ancestors." **END**





# Patron of the Arts

by FRED SABERHAGEN

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*The Berserkers loathed life —  
but life had the power of doing  
them one unduplicable service!*

After some hours' work, Herron found himself hungry, and willing to pause for food. Looking over what he had just done, he could easily imagine one of the sycophantic critics praising it: A huge canvas, of discordant and brutal line, aflame with a sense of engulfing menace! And for once, Herron thought, the critic might be praising something good.

Turning away from his view of easel and blank bulkhead, Herron found that his captor had moved up silently to stand only an arm's length behind him, for all the world like some human kibitzer.

He had to chuckle. "I suppose you've some idiotic suggestion to make?"

The roughly man-shaped machine said nothing, though it had what might be a speaker mounted on what might be a face. Herron

shrugged and walked around it, going forward in search of the galley. This ship had been only a few hours out from Earth on C-plus drive when the berserker machine had run it down and captured it; and Piers Herron, the only passenger, had not yet had time to learn his way around.

It was more than a galley, he saw when he reached it—it was meant to be a place where arty colonial ladies could sit and twitter over tea when they grew weary of staring at pictures. The *Franz Hals* had been built as a traveling museum; then the war of life against berserker machine had grown hot around Sol, and BuCulture had ineptly decided that Earth's art treasures would be safer if shipped away to Tau Epsilon. The *Franz* was ideally suited for such a mission, and for almost nothing else.

Looking further forward from the entrance to the galley, Herron could see that the door to the crew compartment had been battered down, but he did not go to look inside. Not that it would bother him to look, he told himself; he was as indifferent to horror as he was to almost all other human things. The *Franz's* crew of two were in there, or what was left of them after they had tried to fight off the berserker's boarding machines. Doubtless they had preferred death to capture.

Herron preferred nothing. Now he was probably the only living being—apart from a few bacteria—within half a light year; and he was pleased to discover that his situation did not terrify him, that his long-growing weariness of life was not just a pose to fool himself.

His metal captor followed him into the galley, watching while he set the kitchen devices to work. "Still no suggestions?" Herron asked it. "Maybe you're smarter than I thought."

"I am what men call a berserker," the man-shaped thing said to him suddenly, in a squeaky, ineffectual-sounding voice. "I have captured your ship, and I will talk with you through this small machine you see. Do you grasp my meaning?"

"I understand as well as I need to." He knew his captor was an utterly alien and inanimate thing, built in some segment of time and space beyond human ken, built to fight in some ancient war between races who had never heard of

Earth, and who perhaps were long dead themselves. Now the berserker machines' war was against all the life of the galaxy.

Herron had not yet seen the berserker itself but he knew it would be a sphere the size of a planetoid, now a few miles away, or perhaps a few hundred or a thousand miles, from the ship it had captured. Captain Hanus had tried desperately to escape it, diving the *Franz* into a cloud of dark nebula where no ship or machine could move faster than light, and where the advantage in speed lay with the smaller hull.

The chase had been at speeds up to a thousand miles a second. Forced to remain in normal space, the berserker could not steer its bulk among the meteoroids and gas-wisps as well as the *Franz's* radar-computer system could maneuver the fleeing ship. But the berserker had sent an armed launch of its own to take up the chase, and the weaponless *Franz* had had no chance.

Now, dishes of food, hot and cold, popped out on a galley table, and Herron bowed to the machine. "Will you join me?"

"I need no organic food."

Herron sat down with a sigh. "In the end," he told the machine, "you'll find that lack of humor is as pointless as laughter. Wait and see if I'm not right." He began to eat, and found himself not so hungry as he had thought. Evidently his body still feared death—this surprised him a little.

"Do you normally function in the

operation of this ship?" the machine asked.

"No," he said, making himself chew and swallow. "I'm not much good at pushing buttons." A peculiar thing that had happened was nagging at Herron. When capture was only minutes away, Captain Hanus had come dashing aft from the control room, grabbing Herron and dragging him along in a tearing hurry, aft past all the stored art treasures.

"Herron, listen — if we don't make it, see here?" Tooling open a double hatch in the stern compartment, the captain had pointed into what looked like a short padded tunnel, the diameter of a large drain pipe. "The regular lifeboat won't get away, but this might."

"Are you waiting for the Second Officer, Captain, or leaving us now?"

"There's room for only one, you fool, and I'm not the one who's going."

"You mean to save me? Captain, I'm touched!" Herron laughed, easily and naturally. "But don't put yourself out."

"You idiot. Can I trust you?" Hanus lunged into the boat, his hands flying over its controls. Then he backed out, glaring like a madman. "Listen. Look here. This button is the activator; now I've set things up so the boat should come out in the main shipping lanes and start sending a distress signal. Chances are she'll be picked up safely then. Now the controls are set, only this activator button needs to be pushed down —"

The berserker's launch had attacked at that moment, with a roar like mountains falling on the hull of the ship. The lights and the artificial gravity had failed and then come abruptly back. Piers Herron had been thrown on his side, his wind knocked out. He had watched while the captain, regaining his feet and moving like a man in a daze, had closed the hatch on the mysterious little boat again and staggered forward toward his control room.

"**W**hy are you here?" the machine asked Herron.

He dropped the forkful of food he had been staring at. He didn't have to hesitate before answering the question. "Do you know what BuCulture is? They're the fools in charge of Art, on Earth. Some of them, like a lot of other fools, think I'm a great painter. They worship me. When I said I wanted to leave Earth on this ship, they made it possible.

"I wanted to leave because almost everything that is worthwhile in any true sense is being removed from Earth. A good part of it is on this ship. What's left behind on the planet is only a swarm of animals, breeding and dying, fighting—" he paused.

"Why did you not try to fight or to hide when my machines boarded this ship?"

"Because it would have done no good."

When the berserker's prize crew had forced their way in through an airlock, Herron had been setting up his easel in what was to have been

a small exhibition hall, and he had paused to watch the uninvited visitors file past. One of the man-shaped metal things, the one through which he was being questioned now, had stayed to stare at him through its lenses while the others had moved on forward to the crew compartment.

"Herron!" the intercom had shouted. "Try, Herron, please! You know what to do!" Clanging noises followed, and gunshots and curses.

What to do, Captain? Why, yes. The shock of events and the promise of imminent death had stirred up some kind of life in Piers Herron. He looked with interest at the alien captor, the inhuman cold of deep space frosting over its metal here in the warm cabin. Then he turned away from it and began to paint the berserker, trying to catch not the outward shape he had never seen, but what he felt of its inwardness. He felt the emotionless deadlines of its watching lenses boring into his back. The sensation was faintly pleasurable, like cold spring sunshine.

"What is good?" the machine asked Herron, standing over him in the galley while he tried to eat.

He snorted. "You tell me."

It took him literally. "To serve the cause of what men call death is good. To destroy life is good."

Herron pushed his nearly full plate into a disposal slot and stood up. "You're almost right — but even if you were entirely right, why so enthusiastic? What is there praise-

worthy about death?" Now his thoughts surprised him as his lack of appetite had.

"I am entirely right," said the machine.

For long seconds Herron stood still, as if thinking, though his mind was almost entirely blank. "No," he said finally, and waited for a bolt to strike him.

"In what do you think I am wrong?" it asked.

"I'll show you." He led it out of the galley, his hands sweating and his mouth dry. Why wouldn't the damned thing kill him and have done?

The paintings were racked row on row and tier on tier; there was no room in the ship for more than a few to be displayed in a conventional way. Herron found the drawer he wanted and pulled it open so the portrait inside swung into full view, lights springing on around it to bring out the rich colors beneath the twentieth century statglass coating.

"This is where you're wrong," Herron said.

The man-shaped thing's scanner studied the portrait for perhaps fifteen seconds. "Explain what you are showing me," it said.

"I bow to you!" Herron did so. "You admit ignorance! You even ask an intelligible question, if one that is somewhat too broad. Explain, you say. First, tell me what *you* see here."

"I see the image of a life-unit, its third spatial dimension of negligible size as compared to the other two. The image is sealed inside a



protective jacket transparent to the wavelengths used by the human eye. The life-unit imaged is, or was, an adult male apparently in good functional condition, garmented in a manner I have not seen before. What I take to be one garment is held before him —

"You see a man with a glove," Herron cut in, wearying of his bitter game. "That is the title, *Man With A Glove*. Now what do you say it means?"

There was a pause of twenty seconds. "Is it an attempt to praise life, to say that life is good?"

Looking now at Titian's eight hundred year old more-than-masterpiece, Herron for the moment hardly heard what the machine was saying; he was thinking helplessly and hopelessly of his own most recent work.

"Now you will tell me what it means," said the machine without emphasis.

Herron walked away without answering, leaving the drawer open.

The berserker's mouthpiece walked at his side. "Tell me what it means or you will be punished."

"If you can pause to think, so can I." But Herron's stomach had knotted up at the threat of punishment, seeming to feel that pain mattered even more than death. Herron had great contempt for his stomach.

His feet took him back to his easel. Looking at the discordant and brutal line that a few minutes ago had pleased him, he now found it as disgusting as everything else he had tried to do in the past year.

The berserker asked: "What have you made here?"

Herron picked up a brush he had forgotten to clean, and wiped at it irritably.

"It is my attempt to get at your essence; to capture you with paint and canvas as you have seen those humans captured." He waved at the storage racks. "My attempt has failed, as most do."

There was another pause, which Herron did not try to time.

"An attempt to praise me?"

Herron broke the spoiled brush and threw it down. "Call it what you like."

This time the pause was short, and at its end the machine did not speak, but turned away and walked in the direction of the airlock. Some of its fellows clanked past to join it. From the direction of the airlock there began to come sounds like those of heavy metal being worked and hammered. The interrogation seemed to be over for the time being.

Herron's thoughts wanted to be anywhere but on his work or on his fate, and they returned to what Hanus had shown him, or tried to show him. Not a regular lifeboat, but she might get away, the captain had said. All it needs now is to press the button.

Herron started walking, smiling faintly as he realized that if this berserker was as careless as it seemed, he might possibly escape it.

Escape to what? He couldn't paint any more, if he ever could. All that really mattered to him now

was here, and on other ships leaving Earth.

Back at the storage rack, Herron swung the *Man With A Glove* out so its case came free from the rack and became a handy cart. He wheeled the portrait aft. There might yet be one worthwhile thing he could do with his life.

The picture was massive in its statglass shielding, but he thought he could fit it into the boat.

As an itch might nag a dying man, the question of what the captain had been intending with the boat nagged Herron. Hanus hadn't seemed worried about Herron's fate, but instead had spoken of trusting Herron . . .

Nearing the stern, unwatched by the machines, Herron passed a strapped-down stack of crated statuary, and heard a noise, a rapid feeble pounding.

It took several minutes to find and open the proper case. When he lifted the lid with its padded lining, a girl wearing a coverall sat up, her hair all wild as if standing in terror.

"Are they gone?" She had bitten at her fingers and nails until they were bleeding. When he didn't answer at once, she repeated her question again and again, in a rising whine.

"The machines are still here," he said at last.

Literally shaking in her fear, she climbed out of the case. "Where's Gus? Have they taken him?"

"Gus?" But he thought he was beginning to understand.

"Gus Hanus, the captain. He and

I are — he was trying to save me, to get me away from Earth."

"I'm quite sure he's dead," said Herron. "He fought the machines."

Her bleeding fingers clutched at her lower face. "They'll kill us, too. Or worse! What can we do?"

"Don't mourn your lover so deeply," he said. But the girl seemed not to hear him; her wild eyes looked this way and that, expecting the machines. "Help me with this picture," he told her calmly. "Hold the door there for me."

She obeyed as if half-hypnotized, not questioning what he was doing.

"Gus said there'd be a boat," she muttered to herself. "If he had to smuggle me down to Tau Epsilon he was going to use a special little boat —" She broke off, staring at Herron, afraid that he had heard her and would steal her boat. As indeed he was going to do.

When he had the painting in the stern compartment, he stopped. He looked long at the *Man With A Glove*, but in the end all he could seem to see was that the fingertips of the ungloved hand were not bitten bloody.

Herron took the shivering girl by the arm and pushed her into the tiny boat. She huddled there in her dazed terror; she was not good-looking. He wondered what Hanus had seen in her.

"There's room for only one," he said, and she shrank and bared her teeth as if afraid he meant to drag her out again. "After I close the hatch, push that button there, the activator. Understand?"

That she understood at once. He

dogged the double hatch shut, and waited. Only about three seconds passed before there came a soft scraping sound that he supposed meant that the boat had gone.

Nearby was a tiny observation blister, and Herron put his head into it and watched the stars turn beyond the dark blizzard of the nebula. After a while he saw the berserker through the blizzard, turning with the stars, black and rounded and bigger than any mountain. It gave no sign that it had detected the tiny boat slipping away. Its launch was very near the *Franz* but none of the commensal machines were in sight.

Looking the *Man With A Glove* in the eye, Herron pushed him forward again, to a spot near his easel. The discordant lines of Herron's own work were now worse than disgusting, but Herron made himself work on them.

He hadn't time to do much before the man-shaped machine came walking back to him; the uproar of metalworking had ceased. Wiping his brush carefully, Herron put it down, and nodded at his berserker-portrait. "When you destroy all the rest, save this painting. Carry it back to those who built you, they deserve it."

The machine-voice squeaked back at him: "Why do you think I will destroy paintings? Even if they are attempts to praise life, they are dead things in themselves, and so in themselves they are good."

Herron was suddenly too fright-

ened and weary to speak. Looking dully into the machine's lenses, he saw there tiny flickerings, keeping time with his own pulse and breathing, like the indications of a lie-detector.

"Your mind is divided," said the machine. "But with its much greater part you have praised me. I have repaired your ship, and set its course. I now release you, so other life-units can learn from you to praise what is good."

Herron could only stand there staring straight ahead of him, while a trampling of metal feet went past, and there was a final scraping on the hull.

After some time he realized he was alive and free.

At first he shrank from the dead men, but after once touching them he soon got them into a freezer. He had no particular reason to think either of them Believers, but he found a book and read Islamic, Ethical, Christian and Jewish burial services.

Then he found an undamaged handgun on the deck, and went prowling the ship, taken suddenly with the wild notion that a machine might have stayed behind. Pausing only to tear down the abomination from his easel, he went on to the very stern. There he had to stop, facing the direction in which he supposed the berserker now was.

"Damn you, I can change!" he shouted at the stern bulkhead. His voice broke. "I can paint again. I'll show you . . . I can change. I am alive." END



# SKYLARK DuQUESNE

by EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph.D.

Illustrated by MORROW

*Across the great galaxies Seaton and DuQuesne battled—whole races their pawns—and the universe their prize!*

Seaton, halfway to the headsets, paused, stunned. That strident roar of klaxons was a noise he had not expected ever to hear except in test. It was the dire warning that the life of the *Valeron's* defensive screens was to be measured in seconds and but few of them.

"Yipe!" he yelled then. "Control-room *fast!*" His voice of course went

unheard in the clamor of the horns; but his yelling had been purely reflexive, anyway. While uttering the first syllable he was energizing beams of force that hurtled all eight of the party through ultra-high-speed locks that snapped open in front of them and crashed shut behind them—down into the neutral-gray chamber at the base of the giant Brain.

## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE —

The deadliest enemies in the universe are Richard Seaton and Marc C. DuQuesne . . . but they have patched together their feud in order to join against strange enemies from space.

Seaton enters the partnership with open eyes: He knows that Blackie DuQuesne is his enemy. But he also knows that, next to Seaton himself, he is perhaps the ablest human being alive — and his brains and fighting fury will be needed. DuQuesne, on the other hand, has lost to Seaton too many times before to risk a move against him without every advantage he can get. It was Seaton who imprisoned him in a stasis of pure force, from which he escaped only through the combination of fortune and the superhuman skills of the disembodied intelligences who were his fellow exiles. The partnership is as unstable as mercury fulminate; but while they are together, Seaton and DuQuesne are a team that has no equal in the cosmos.

And they need all their resources. For space is filled with races driven by their destinies into conflict with humanity — the Jelmi, strange humans from another galaxy; the Llurdi, their batlike overlords . . . and an enemy stranger and more deadly still.

But DuQuesne has completed his plans. With the aid of a new fourth-dimensional translator invented by the Jelmi he is confident he can take Seaton. He sends six hired gunmen through the fourth dimension to kill Seaton and his friends.

But the gunmen fail. In that same moment, another enemy strikes: At fantastically long range an undetected spaceship is attacking them with destroying rays . . . and their defenses are going down!

Seaton rammed his head into his master controller and began furiously but accurately to think . . . and as he sat there, face harsh and white and strained, a vast structure of inoson, interlaced with the heaviest fields of force generable by the *Valeron's* mighty engines, came into being around the Brain and the other absolutely vital components of the worldlet's core.

After a few minutes of fantastic effort Seaton sighed gustily and tried to grin. "We're holding 'em and we're getting away," he said, "But I had to let 'em whittle us down to just about a nub before I could

spare power enough to grab a lunch off of them while they were getting a square meal off of us."

He spoke the exact truth. The attack had been so incredibly violent that in order to counter it he had had to apply the full power of the *Valeron*, designed to protect a surface of over three million square kilometers, to an area of less than thirty thousand.

"But what was it, Dick?" Dorothy shrieked. "What *could* it have been — possibly?"

"I don't know. But you realize, don't you, that it was two separate, unrelated attacks? Not one?"

"Why, I . . . I don't think I realize anything yet."

"Those guns were Colts," Seaton said, flatly. "Forty-fives. Made in the U. S. A. So that part of it was DuQuesne's doing. He wanted—still wants—the *Valeron*. Bad. But those super-energy super-weapons were definitely something else—as sure as God made apples. No possible ship could put that much stuff out, let alone DuQuesne's *Capital D*. So the question rises and asks itself—"

"Just a minute, Dick!" Crane broke in. "Even granting so extraordinary a coincidence as two separate attacks—"

"Coincidence, hell!" Seaton snarled. "There is no such thing. And why postulate an impossibility when you've got Blackie DuQuesne? He sucked me in, as sure as hell's a mantrap—you can bet your case buck on that. And he outfoxed himself doing it, for all the tea in China!"

"What do you mean, Dick?" Dorothy demanded. "How could he have?"

"Plain as the nose on . . . plainer! He got it from somewhere, the son of a—" Seaton bit the noun savagely off—"probably from Klazmon, that Galaxy DW-427-LU up ahead there that we were heading for is full of bad Indians. So he honeyed up to the Jelmi, got that fourth-dimensional gadget off of them and tried to kill us with it. And he would have succeeded, except for the pure luck of our having lowered our gravity so drastically on account of Dunark and Sitar."

"I see," Crane said. "And the In-

dians jumped us when he pulled the trigger—perhaps attracted by his use of the 'gadget'."

"That's my guess, anyway," Seaton admitted. "DuQuesne thought he was allowing plenty of leeway in both time and space for his operation. But he wasn't. He had no more idea than we did, Mart, that any such forces as *those* could possibly be delivered at such extreme tange. And one simple, easy lie—the coordinates of the Luridan galaxy—was all he had to tell me and defend against my probe."

DuQuesne's attention was wrenched from his timer by a glare of light from a visiplate. He glanced at it, his jaw dropping in surprise; then his hands flashed to the controls of his fourth-dimensional transmitter and his six men appeared—four of them gruesomely headless. For a moment all six stood stiffly upright; then, as the supporting forces vanished, all six bodies slumped bonelessly to the floor.

DuQuesne, after making quickly sure that the two were in fact as dead as were the four, shrugged his shoulders and flipped the bodies out into deep space. Then, donning practically opaque goggles, he studied the incandescently glaring plate—to see that the *Skylark of Valeron* now looked like a minor sun.

Involuntarily he caught his breath. The *Valeron's* screens were failing—failing fast. Course after course, including her mighty zones of force, her every defensive layer was flaring into and through the violet and going black.

DuQuesne clenched his fists; set his teeth so hard that his jaw-muscles stood out in bands and lumps. Anything to put out that much of that kind of stuff would have to be vast indeed. Incredibly vast. Nothing could be that big—nothing even pertaining, as far as DuQuesne knew, to any civilization or culture of the known universe.

Relaxing a little, he assembled a working projection, but before sending it out he paused in thought.

Seaton hadn't attacked; he wasn't the type to. He wouldn't have, even if he could have done so at that range. So the strangers, whoever or whatever they might be, were the aggressors, with a capital "A". Guilty of unprovoked and reasonless aggression; aggression in the first degree. So what Tammon had told him about that galaxy being dominated by "inimical life-forms" was the understatement of the year. And he, DuQuesne himself, had triggered the attack; the fact that it had followed his own attack so nearly instantly made that a certainty. How had he triggered it? Almost certainly by the use of the fourth-dimensional transmitter . . .

But how? He didn't know and he couldn't guess . . . and at the moment it didn't make a lick of difference. He hadn't used any sixth-order stuff since then and he sure wouldn't use any now for a good while. If he did anything at all, he'd pussyfoot it, but good. He didn't want any part of anything that could manhandle the *Skylark of Valeron* like that. His *Capital D* was small enough and far enough back—he hoped!—to avoid

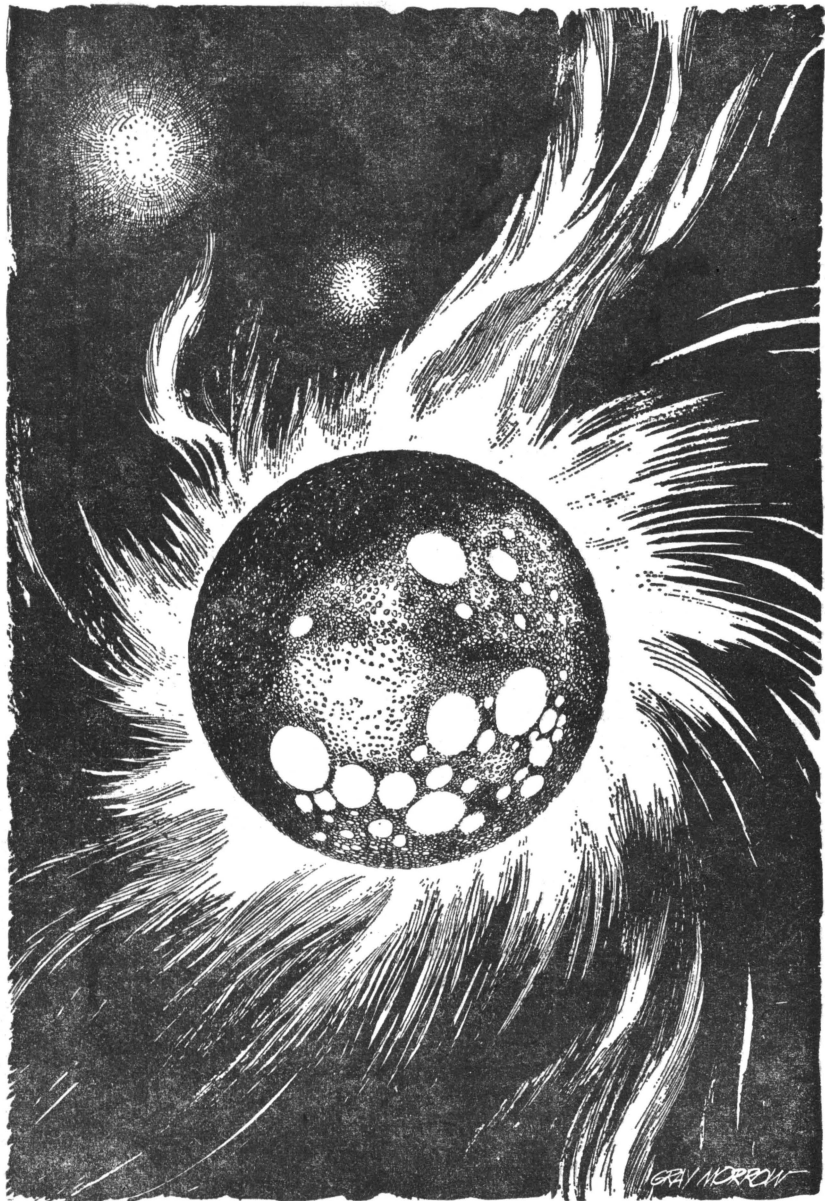
detection. No he wouldn't do a single damn thing except look on.

Fascinated, DuQuesne stared into the brilliance of his plate. All the *Valeron's* screens were down now. Even the ultra-powerful innermost zone—the wall shield itself, the last line of defense of the bare synthetic of the worldlet's outer skin—was going fast. Huge black areas appeared, but they were black only momentarily. Such was the power of that incredible assault that thousands of tons of inoson flared in an instant into ragingly incandescent vapor; literally exploding; exploding with such inconceivable violence as to blast huge masses of solid inoson out of the *Valeron's* thick skin and hurl them at frightful speed out into space.

And the *Valeron* was not fighting back. She couldn't.

This fact, more than anything else, rocked DuQuesne to the core and gave him the measure of the power at the disposal of the "inimical" entities of that galaxy. For he, knowing the *Valeron's* strength, now knew starkly that she was being attacked by forces of a magnitude never even approximated by the wildest imaginings of man.

Scowling in concentration, he kept on watching the disaster. Watched while those utterly unbelievable forces peeled the *Valeron* down like an onion, layer after kilometer-thick layer. Watched until that for which he had almost ceased to hope finally took place. The *Valeron*, down now to the merest fraction of her original size—burned and blasted down to



the veriest core—struck back. And that counterstroke was *no* love-tap. The ether and all the subethers seethed and roiled under the vehemence of that devastating bolt of energy.

The *Skylark of Valeron* vanished from DuQuesne's plate; that plate went black; and DuQuesne stood up and stretched the kinks out of his muscles. Seaton could of course flit away on the sixth; but he, DuQuesne, couldn't. Not without being detected and getting burned to a crisp. Against the forces that he had just seen in action against the *Skylark of Valeron*, DuQuesne's own *Capital D* didn't stand the proverbial chance of the nitrocellulose dog chasing the asbestos cat in hell.

If the *Skylark of Valeron* had been hurt, half-demolished and reduced to an irreducible core of fighting muscle before it could mount one successful counter-blow against this new and unexpected enemy, then the *Capital D* would be reduced to its primitive gases. DuQuesne rapidly, soberly and accurately came to the conclusion that he simply did not own ship enough to play in this league. Not yet . . .

Wherefore he pussyfooted it away from there at an acceleration of only a few lights; and he put many parsecs of distance between himself and the scene of recent hostilities before he cut in his space-annihilating sixth-order drive and began really to travel. He did not know whether Seaton and his party were surviving; he did not care. He did not know the identity of the race which had hurt them so badly, so fast.

What DuQuesne knew was that, as a bare minimum, he needed something as big as the *Valeron*, plus the fourth-dimensional tricks he had learned from the Jelmi, plus a highly developed element of caution based on the scene he had just witnessed. And he knew what to do about it, and where to go to do it; wherefore his course was laid for the First Galaxy and Earth.

Hundreds of thousands of parsecs away from the scene of disaster, Seaton cut his drive and began gingerly to relax the terrific power of his defensive screens.

No young turtle, tentatively poking his head out of his shell to see if the marauding gulls had left, was more careful than Seaton. He had been caught off base twice. He did not propose to let it happen again.

Another man might have raged and sworn at DuQuesne for his treachery; or panicked at the fear inspired by the fourth-dimensional transmitter DuQuesne had come up with, or the massive blow that had fallen from nowhere. Seaton did not. The possibility—no, the virtual certainty—of treachery from DuQuesne he had accepted and discounted in the first second of receiving DuQuesne's distress call. He had accepted the risks, and grimly calculated that in any encounter, however treacherous, DuQuesne would fail; and he had been right. The sudden attack from out of nowhere, however, was something else again. What made it worse was not that Seaton had no idea of its source or reason. The thing that caused his

eyes to narrow, his face to wear a hard, thoughtful scowl was that he in fact had a very good idea indeed—and he didn't like it.

But for the moment they were free. Seaton checked and double-checked every gauge and warning device and nodded at last.

"Good," he said then, "I was more than half expecting a kick in the pants, even way out here. The next item on our agenda is a council of war; so cluster 'round, everybody, and get comfortable." He turned control over to the Brain, sat down beside Dorothy, stroked his pipe, and went on:

"Point one; DuQuesne. He got stuff somewhere—virtually certainly from the Jelmi—at least the fourth-dimensional transmitter and we don't know what else, that he didn't put out anything about. Naturally. And he sucked me in like Mary's little lamb. Also naturally. At hindsight I'm a blinding flash and a deafening report. I've got a few glimmerings, but you're the brain, Mart; so give out with analysis and synthesis."

Crane did so; covering the essential points and concluding: "Since the plug-chart was accurate, the course was accurate. Therefore, besides holding back vital information, DuQuesne lied about one or both of two things: the point at which the signal was received and the direction from which it came."

"Well, you can find out about that easily enough," Dorothy said. "You know, that dingus you catch light-waves with, so as to see exactly what went on years and years ago.

Or wouldn't it work, this far away?"

Seaton nodded. "Worth a try. Dunark?"

"I say go after DuQuesne!" the Osnomian said viciously. "Catch him and blow him and his *Capital D* to hellangone up!"

Seaton shook his head. "I can't buy that—at the moment. Now that he's flopped again at murder, I don't think he's of first importance any more. You see, I haven't mentioned Point Two yet, which is a datum I didn't put into the pot because I wanted to thrash Point One out first. It's about who the enemy really are. When I finally got organized to slug them a good one back, I followed the shot. They knew they'd been nudged, believe me. So much so that in the confusion I got quite a lot of information. They're Chlorans. Of, if not exactly like the Chlorans of Chlora, that we had all the trouble with, as nearly identical as makes no difference."

"Chlorans!" Dorothy and Margaret shrieked as one, and five minds dwelt briefly upon that hideous and ultimately terrible race of amoeboid monstrosities who, living in an atmosphere of gaseous chlorine, made it a point to enslave or to destroy all the humanity of all the planets they could reach.

All five remembered, very vividly, the starkly unalloyed ferocity which one race of Chlorans had attacked the planet Valeron; near which the *Skylark of Valeron* had been built and after which she had been named. They remembered the horrifyingly narrow margin by which those Chlor-

ans had been defeated. They also remembered that the Chlorans had not even then been slaughtered. The Skylarkers had merely enclosed the planet Chlora in a stasis of time and sent it back—on a trip that would last, for everyone and everything outside that stasis, some four hundred years—to its own native solar system, from which it had been torn by a near-collision of suns in the longgone past. The Skylarkers should have blown Chlora into impalpable and invisible debris, and the men of the party had wanted to do just that, but Dorothy and Margaret and the essentially gentle Valeronians had been dead set against genocide.

Dorothy broke the short silence. "But how *could* they be, Dick?" she asked. "Way out here? But of course, if we human beings could do it—" She paused.

"But of course," Seaton agreed sourly. "Why not? Why shouldn't they be as widespread as humanity is? Or even more so, if they have killed enough of us off? And why shouldn't they be smarter than those others were? Look at how much we've learned in just months, not millenia, of time."

Another and longer silence fell; which was broken by Seaton. "Well, two things are certain. They're rabidly anti-social and they've got—at the moment—a lot more stuff than we have. They've got it to sell, like farmers have hay. It's also a dead-sure cinch that we can't do a thing—not *anything*—without a lot more data than we have now. It'll take all the science of Norlamin

and maybe a nickel's worth besides to design and build what we'll have to have. And they can't go it blind. Nobody can. And we all know enough about Chlorans to know that we won't get one iota or one of Peg's smidgeons of information out of them by remote control. At the first touch of any kind of a high-order feeler they'll bat our ears down . . . to a fare-thee-well. However, other means are available."

And he glanced at a monitor where for some minutes a display had shown a planet of the galaxy from which their recent attacker had come.

**D**uring this fairly long—for Seaton—speech, and during the silence that had preceded it, two things had been happening.

First the controlling Brain of the ship had been carrying out a program of Seaton's Star by star, system by system, it had been scanning the components of the nearest galaxy to the scene of their encounter. It had in fact verified Seaton's conclusions: the galaxy was dominated by Chlorans. Their works were everywhere. But it had also supported a—not a conclusion; a hope, more accurately — that Seaton had hardly dared put in words. Although the Chlorans ruled this galaxy. There were oxygen-breathing, warm-blooded races in it too—serfs of the Chlorans of course, but nevertheless occupying their own planets — and it was one such planet that the Brain had finally selected and was now displaying on its monitor.



The other thing was that the sunburn-haired beauty who was Mrs. Richard Ballinger Seaton had been eyeing her husband steadily. At first she had merely looked at him thoughtfully. Then look and mien had become heavily tinged, first with surprise and then with doubt and then with wonder; a wonder that turned into an incredulity that became more and more incredulous. Until finally, unable to hold herself in any longer, she broke in on him.

"Dick!" she cried. "You *wouldn't!* You *know* you wouldn't!"

"I wouldn't? If not, who . . .?" Changing his mind between two words, Seaton cut the rest of the sentence sharply off; shrugged his shoulders, and grinned, somewhat shamefacedly, back at her.

At this point Crane, who had been looking first at one of them and then at the other, put in: "I realize, Dorothy, that you and Dick don't need either language or headsets to communicate with each other, but how about the rest of us? What, exactly, is it that you're not as sure as you'd like to be that he wouldn't do?"

Dorothy opened her mouth to reply, but Seaton beat her to it. "What I would do—and will because I'll have to; because it's my oyster and nobody else's—is, after we sneak up as close as we can without touching off any alarms, take a landing craft and go get the data we absolutely have to have in absolutely the only way it can be gotten."

"And that's what I most emphatically do *not* like!" Dorothy blazed.

"Dick Seaton, you are *not* going to land on an enslaved planet, alone and unarmed and afoot, as an investigating Committee of One! For one thing, we simply don't have the time! Do we? I mean, poor old *Valeron* is simply a wreck! We've got to go somewhere and—"

But Seaton was shaking his head. "The Brain can handle that by itself," he said. "All it needs is time. As a matter of fact, you've put your finger on a first-rate reason for my going in, alone. There's simply not much else we can do until the *Valeron* is back in shape again."

"Not *your* going in." Dorothy blazed. "Flatly, positively *no*."

Again Seaton shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say I'm madly in love with the idea myself, but who's *any* better qualified? Or as well? Because I know that you, Dottie, aren't the type to advocate us sitting on our hands and letting them have all the races of humanity, wherever situate. So who?"

"Me," Shiro said, promptly if ungrammatically. "Not as good, *but* good enough. You can tell me what data you want and I can and will get it, just as well as . . ."

"Bounce back, both of you, you've struck a rubber fence!" Dunark snapped. "That job's for Sitar and me." The green-skinned princess waved her pistol in the air and nodded her head enthusiastically and her warlord went on, "You and I being brain-brothers, Dick, I'd *know* exactly what you want. And she and I would blast—"

"Yeah, that's what I know damn well you'd do." Seaton broke in,

only to be interrupted in turn by Crane—who was not in the habit of interrupting anyone even once, to say nothing of twice.

“Excuse me, everyone,” he said, “but you’re all wrong, I think. My thought at the moment, Dick, is that your life is altogether too important to the project as a whole to be risked as you propose risking it. As to you others, with all due respect for your abilities, I do not believe that either of you is as well qualified for this kind of an investigation as I am—”

Margaret leaped to her feet in protest, but Crane went quietly on: “—in either experience or training. However, we should not decide that point yet—or at all, for that matter. We are all too biased. I therefore suggest, Dick, that we feed the Brain everything we have and keep on feeding it everything pertinent we can get hold of, until it has enough data to make that decision for us.”

“That makes sense,” Seaton said, and both Dorothy and Margaret nodded—but both with very evident reservations. “The first time anything has made sense today!”

## XV

### Ky-El Mokak the Wilder

The first thing Seaton and Crane had to do, of course, was to figure out how to get back somewhere near Galaxy DW-427-LU, within fourth-order range of that one particular extremely powerful Chloran system, without using enough sixth-order stuff to touch

off any alarms—but still enough to make the trip in days instead of in months. Some sixth-order emanations could be neutralized by properly phased and properly placed counter-generators; the big question being, how much?

The answer turned out to be, according to Crane, “Not enough”—but, according to Seaton, “Satisfactory”. At least, it did make the trip not only possible, but feasible. And during the days of that trip each Skylarker worked—with the Brain or with a computer or with pencil and paper or with paint or India ink and a brush, each according to his bent—on the problem of what could be done about the Chlorans.

They made little headway, if any at all. They did not have enough data. Inescapably, the attitude of each was very strongly affected by what he or she knew about the Chlorans they had already encountered. They were all smart enough to know that this was as indefensible as it was inevitable.

Thus, while each of them developed a picture completely unlike anyone else’s as to what the truth probably was, none of them was convinced enough of the validity of his theory to defend it vigorously. Thus it was discussion, not argument, that went on throughout the cautious approach to the forbidden territory and the ultra-cautious investigation of the Tellus-type planet the Brain had selected through powerful optical telescopes and by means of third- and fourth-order apparatus. Then they fell silent, ap-

palled; for that world was inhabited by highly intelligent human beings and what had been done to it was shocking indeed.

They had seen what had been done to the planet Valeron. This was worse; much worse. On Valeron the ruins had been recognizable as having once been cities. Even those that had been blown up or slagged down by nuclear energies had shown traces of what they had once been. There had been remnants and fragments of structural members, unfused portions of the largest buildings, recognizable outlines and traces of thoroughfares and so on. But here, where all of the big cities and three-fourths or more of the medium-sized ones had been, there were now only huge sheets of glass.

Sheets of glass ranging in area from ten or fifteen square miles up to several thousands of square miles, and variously from dozens up to hundreds of feet thick: level sheets of cracked and shattered, almost transparent, vari-colored glass. The people of the remaining cities and towns and villages were human. In fact, they were white Caucasians—as white and as Caucasian as the citizens of Tampa or of Chicago or of Portland, Oregon or of Portland, Maine. Neither Seaton nor Shiro, search as they would, could find any evidence that any Oriental types then lived or ever had lived on that world—to Shiro's lasting regret. He, at least, was eliminated as a spy.

"Well, Dottie?" Seaton asked.

She gnawed her lip. "Well . . . I suppose we'll have to do *something*—but hey!" she exclaimed, voice and expression changing markedly. "How come you think you have to go down there at all to find out what the score is? You've snatched people right and left all over the place with ordinary beams and things, *long* before anybody ever heard of that sixth-order, fourth-dimensional gizmo."

Seaton actually blushed. "That's right, my pet," he admitted. "Once again you've got a point. I'll pick one out that's so far away from everybody else that he won't be missed for a while. Maybe two'd be better."

Since it was an easy matter to find isolated specimens of the humanity of that world, it was less than an hour later that two men—one from a town, one found wandering alone in the mountains—were being examined by the Brain. And *what* an examination! Everything in their minds—literally everything, down to the last-least-tiniest coded "bit" of every long-chain proteinoid molecule of every convolution of their brains—everything was being transferred to the *Valeron's* Great Brain; was being filed away in its practically unfillable memory banks.

When the transfer was complete, Sitar drew her pistol, very evidently intending to do away with the natives then and there. But Dorothy of course would not stand for that. Instead, she herself put them back into a shell of force and ran them through the *Valeron's* locks and down into

a mountain cave, which she then half-filled with food. "I'd advise you *W.O.*" she told them then, in their own language, "to stay put here for a few days and keep out of trouble. If you really *want* to get yourselves killed, though, that's all right with me. Go ahead any time."

When Dorothy brought her attention back into the control room, the Brain had finished its analysis of the data it had just secured from the natives, had correlated it with all their pertinent data it had in its banks, and was beginning to put out its synthesized report.

That report came in thought; in diamond-sharp, diamond-clear thought that was not only super-intelligible and super-audible, but also was more starkly visible than any possible tri-di. It gave, as no possible other form of report could give, the entire history of the race to which those two men belonged. It described in detail and at length the Chlorans and the relationship between the two races, and went on to give, in equal detail, the most probable course of near-term events. It told Seaton that he should investigate this planet Ray-See-Nee in person. It told him in fine detail what to wear, where to go, and, practically every move to make for the ensuing twenty-four hours.

At that point the report stopped, and when Seaton demanded more information, the Brain balked. "Data insufficient," it thought, and everyone there would have sworn that the Great Brain actually had a consciousness of self as it went on, "This

construct—" it actually meant "I"—"is not built to guess, but deals only in virtual certainties; that is, with probabilities that approximate unity to twelve or more nines. With additional data, this matter can be explored to a depth quite strictly proportional to the sufficiency of the data. That is all."

"That's the package, Dottie," Seaton said then. "If we want to reach the Chlorans without them reaching us first, there's how. That makes it a force, wouldn't you say?"

Dorothy wasn't sure. "For twenty-four hours, I guess," she agreed, dubiously. "After which time I think I'll be screaming for you to come back here and feed that monster some more data. So be mighty darn sure to get some."

"I'll try to, that's for sure. But the really smart thing to do might be to take this wreckage half a dozen galaxies away and put the Brain to work rebuilding her while I'm down there investigating."

"D'you think I'll sit still for *that*?" Dorothy blazed. "If you do, you're completely out of your mind!"

And even Crane did not subscribe to the idea. "Why?" he asked, "Just to tear her down again after you've found out what we'll have to have?"

"That's so, too." Seaton thought for a moment, gray eyes narrowed and focused on infinity, translating the imperatives of the Brain into practical measures. Then he nodded. "All right. I admit I'll feel better about the deal with you people and the Brain standing by."

And Seaton, now lean and hard and deeply tanned, sat down in his



BOB MORROW

master controller and began to manufacture the various items he would need; exactly as the Brain told him to make them.

And next morning, as the sun began to peer over the crest of the high mountain ridge directly below the *Skylark of Valeron*, Seaton came to ground, hid his tiny landing-craft in a cave at the eighteen-thousand-foot level, and hiked the fifteen miles down-mountain to the nearest town.

He now looked very little indeed like the Doctor Richard B. Seaton of the Rare Metals Laboratory. He was almost gaunt. His skin was burned to a shade consistent with years of exposure to wind and weather. His hair had very evidently been cut — occasionally — with shears by his own hand; his beard had been mowed—equally occasionally—with those same shears.

He wore crudely made, heavy, hobnailed, high-laced boots; a pair of baggy, unsymmetrical breeches of untanned deerskin; and a shapeless, poor-grade-leather coat that had been patched crudely and repeatedly at elbows and shoulders and across the back. He also wore what was left of a hard hat.

As he strode into the town and along its main street, more than one pair of eyes looked at him and then looked again, for the people of that town were not used to seeing anyone walk purposefully. Nor was the sloppily uniformed guard at the entrance to City Hall. This wight—who couldn't have been a day over fifteen—opened his eyes, almost straightened up and said:

“Halt, you. Who'a you? Whatcha want?”

“Business,” Seaton said, briskly. “To see the mayor, Ree-Toe Prenk.”

“Awri'; g'wan in,” and the youth relapsed into semi-stuporous leaning on his ratty-looking rusty rifle.

It was easy enough to find His Honor's office, since it was the only one in the building doing any business at all. Seaton paused just inside the doorway and looked around. Everything was shabby and neglected. The wall-to-wall carpet was stained and dirty, worn through to the floor, in several places. The divider-rail leaned drunkenly, forward here, backward there. The vacant receptionist's desk was as battered and scarred as though it had been through a war. The place hadn't been cleaned for months, and not very thoroughly then.

And the people in that office were in perfect sync with their surroundings. Half a dozen melancholy-looking people, men and women, sat listlessly on hard, straight-backed chairs; staring glumly, fixedly at nothing; completely disinterested, apparently, in whether they were ever called into the inner office or not.

And the secretary! She was dressed in what looked like a gunny-sack. She was scrawny. Her unkempt, straight, lank hair was dirty-mouse brown in color. She didn't look very bright. She was, however, the only secretary in sight, so Seaton strode up to her desk.

“Miss What's-your-name!” he snapped. “Can you, without rupturing a blood-vessel, come to life

long enough to do half a minute's work?"

The girl jumped, started to rise to her feet at her desk, and blushed. "Why, yes . . . yes, sir, I mean. What can we do for you, Mister—?"

"I'm Ky-El Mokak. I want to talk to Hizzonner about turning myself in."

That brought her to life fast. "About *what*?" she cried, and her half-scream was followed instantly by a deeper, louder voice from the intercom.

His honor had not been asleep after all. "You *what*? All right, Fy-Ly, send him in; but be sure he hasn't got a gun first."

"Gun? What would I be doing with a gun?" Seaton patted his pockets, shucked off his dilapidated coat, and made a full turn to show that he was clean. Then, seeing no coat-rack or hangers, he pitched the coat and hat into a corner and strode into the inner office.

It was, if possible, in even worse shape than the outer one. The man behind the desk was fifty-odd years old; lean and bald. He looked worried, dyspeptic and nervous. He held a hand-weapon—which was not the least bit rusty—in workmanlike fashion in a competent-looking right hand. It was not pointed directly at Seaton's midsection. It evidently did not have to be.

"What I'd ought to do right now," the man said quietly, "is blow your brains out without letting you say a word. You're another damn rat. A fink—a spy—maybe a revver or an undergrounder, even. You don't look

like any wilder I ever saw brought in."

The Brain had not dumped Seaton on a strange and dangerous new planet without providing him with a full "knowledge" of its history, its mores and even its dialects. Through the educators Seaton had received enough of Ray-See-Nee's cultural patterns to be able to carry off his role. He knew what His Honor was thinking about; he knew, even, very accurately just how far the man could be pushed, where his real sympathies lay, and what he could be counted upon to do about it.

Wherefore Seaton said easily: "Of course I don't. I've got a brain. Those lard-headed chasseurs couldn't catch me in a thousand years. None of 'em can detect a smell on a skunk. And you won't shoot me, not with the bind you're in. You aren't a damn enough fool to. You wouldn't shoot a crippled kid on crutches, let alone a full-grown, able-bodied man."

Prenk shivered a little, but that was all. "Who says I'm in a bind? What kind of a bind?"

"I say so," Seaton said, flatly. "You're hitting bottom right now. You're using half-grown kids: girls, even. How many weeks is it going to be before you don't make quota and your town and everything and everybody in it get turned into a lake of lava?"

Prenk trembled visibly and his face turned white. "You win," he said unsteadily, and put his pistol back into the top right-hand drawer of his desk. "Whoever you are, you know the score and aren't afraid to

talk about it. You'd have no papers, of course—on you, at least . . . Let's see your arm."

"No number." Seaton rolled up his left sleeve and held his forearm out for examination. "Look close. Scars left by good surgery are fine, but they can't be made invisible."

"I know they can't." His Honor looked very closely indeed, then drew a tremendously deep breath of relief. "You *are* a wilder! You mean to say you've been up in the hills ever since the Conquest without getting caught?"

"That's right. I told you I'm smart, and the brains of a whole platoon of chasseurs, all concentrated down into one, wouldn't equip a half-witted duck."

"But they've got *dogs!*"

"Yeah, but they aren't smart, either. Not very much smarter than the chasseurs are. Hell, I've been living on those dogs half the time. Pretty tough, fried or roasted, but boiled long enough they make mighty tasty stew."

"Mi-Ko-Ta's beard! Who *are* you, really, and what were you, before?"

"I told you, I'm Ky-El-Mokak. I am—was, rather—a Class 'Twelve Fellow of the Institute of Mining Engineers. Recognize the ring?" Seaton went to the desk and placed his left hand flat on its surface.

Prenk studied the massive ornament. It had been fabricated, in strict external accord with the Brain's visualization of what it should have been, from synthesized meteoric metal — metal that had actually never been in open space, to say

nothing of ever having been anywhere near the gray-lichened walls of the revered Institute that Seaton had never seen.

Having examined the ring minutely, Prenk looked up and nodded; his whole manner changed. "I recognize the ring and I can read the symbols. A *Twelve!* It's a shame to register and brand you. If you say so I'll let it drop."

"I'll say so. I'm not committing myself that deep yet."

"All right, but why did you come in? Or is it true that whatever undergrounds spring up are smashed flat in a week?"

"I don't know. I couldn't find any. Not one, and I searched every square mile for a thousand miles north, east, south, and west of here. And I didn't find anybody who wasn't too dangerous to travel with, and I'm gregarious. Also, I don't like caves and I don't like camp cooking and I don't like living off the land — and I do like music and books and art and educated people and so on—in other words, I found out that I can't revert to savagery. And, not least, I like women and there aren't any out there. What few ever make it up there die fast."

"I'm beginning to believe you." A little of the worry and harassment left His Honor's face. "One more question. Why, knowing the jam we're in, did you come here instead of going somewhere where you'd be safe?"

"Because, on the basis of stuff I picked up here and there, you and I together can make it safe here. I



can fix your mining machinery easily enough so you can make quota every week with no sweat; so the town won't get slagged down; not right away, anyway. You aren't a quisling, and my best guess is that most of the spies and storm-troopers have sneaked out or have been pulled out because of what's supposed to be about to happen here," Seaton said.

Prenk stared thoughtfully at Seaton. "You don't appear to be the suicidal type. But you know as well as I do that just making quota won't be enough for very long. What have you really got in mind, Ky-El-Mokak?"

Seaton thought for a moment. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he dug down into his baggy breeches and brought out two closely folded headsets.

"Put one of these on. It isn't a player or a recorder; just a kind of super-telephone. A fast way of exchanging information."

Prenk wore it for a couple of minutes, then took it off, staring suspiciously in turn at it and at Seaton. "Why didn't I ever hear of anything like *that* before?" he demanded. Seaton didn't answer the question and Prenk went on, "Oh; secret. Okay. But what makes you think you can set up an underground right out here in the open?"

"There's no reason in the world why we can't," Seaton declared. "Especially since we'd just be reviving one that everybody, including the Premier and you yourself, thinks is smashed flat and is about to be liquidated."

This was the second really severe test Seaton had made of the Brain's visualizations, and it too stood solidly up. All Prenk said was, "You're doing the talking; keep it up," but his hands, clenching tightly into fists, showed that Seaton's shot had struck the mark.

"I've talked enough," Seaton said then. "From here on I'd be just guessing. It's your turn to talk."

"All right. It's too late now, I'm afraid, for anything to make any difference. Yes, I was the leader of a faction that believed in decent, humane, civilized government, but we weren't here then, we were in the capital. Our coup failed. And those of us who were caught were exiled here and arrangements were made for us to be the next wipe-out."

"Some of your party survived, then. Could you interest them again, do you think?"

"Without arms and equipment, no. That was why we failed."

"Equipment would be no problem."

"It wouldn't?" Prenk's eyes began to light up.

"No." Seaton did not elaborate, but went on, "The problem is people and morale. I can't supply people and we have to start here, not over in the capital. Self-preservation. We've got to make quota. Your people have been hammered down so flat that they don't give a whoop whether they live or die. As I said, I can fix the machinery, but that of itself won't be enough. We'll have to give 'em a shot in the arm of hope."

"Okay, and thanks."

And no one in the outer office, not even the secretary, so much as looked up as the two men, talking busily, walked out.

DuQuesne, en route to Earth, knew just what a madhouse Earth was, and in just what respects. He knew just how nearly impossible it was to buy machine tools of any kind. He also knew just what an immense job it was going to be to build a duplicate of the *Skylark of Valeron*. Or, rather, to build the tools that would build the machines that would in turn build the planetoid. With his high-order constructors he *could* build most of those primary machine tools himself; perhaps all of them in time; but time was exactly what he did not have. Time was decidedly of the essence.

DuQuesne's ex-employer, The World Steel Corporation, had billions of dollars' worth of exactly the kind of tooling he had to have. They not only used it, they manufactured it and sold it. And what of it they did not manufacture they could buy.

How they could buy! As a result of many years of intensive, highly organized, and well directed snooping, Brookings of Steel had over a thousand very effective handles upon over a thousand very important men.

And he, DuQuesne, had a perfect handle on Brookings. He was much harder and ruthless than Brookings was, and Brookings knew it. He could make Brookings buy his primary tooling for him—

enough of it to stuff the *Capital D* to her outer skin. And he would do just that.

Wherefore, as soon as he got within working range of Earth, he launched his projection directly into Brookings' private office. This time, the tycoon was neither calm nor quiet. Standing behind his desk, chair lying on its side behind him, he was leaning forward with his left hand flat on the top of his desk. He was clutching a half-smoked, half-chewed cigar in his right hand and brandishing it furiously in the air. He was yelling at his terrified secretary; who, partly standing in front of her chair and partly crouching into it, was trying to muster up courage to run.

When DuQuesne's projection appeared Brookings fell silent for a moment and goggled. Then he screamed. "Get out of here, you!" at the girl, who scuttled frantically away. He hurled what was left of his cigar into his big bronze ash-tray, where it disintegrated into a shower of sparks and a slathery mess of soggy, sticky brown leaves. And finally, exerting everything he had of self-control, he picked his chair up, sat down in it and glared at DuQuesne.

"Careful of your apoplexy, Fat," DuQuesne sneered then. "I've told you — you'll rupture your aorta some day and that will just about break my heart."

Brookings' reply to that was unprintable; after which he went on, even more bitterly, "This is all it lacks to make this a perfect day."

"Yeah," DuQuesne agreed, calmly. "Some days you can't lay up a cent. I suppose you've been eager to know why I didn't return your goons to you."

"There's nothing in the world I'm less interested in."

"I'll tell you anyway, for the record." DuQuesne did not know what had actually happened, but Brookings was never to know that. "They each got one free shot, as I said they would. But they missed."

"Skip that, Doctor," Brookings said, brusquely. "You didn't come here for that. What do you want this time?"

DuQuesne reached over, took a ball-point out of Brookings' pocket, tore the top sheet off of the memorandum pad on Brookings' desk, and wrote out an order for one hundred twenty-five million dollars, payable to the World Steel Corporation, on a numbered account in a Swiss bank. He slid the order across the glass top of the desk and said:

"You needn't worry about whether it's good or not. It is. I want machine tools and fast deliveries."

Brookings glanced at the paper, but did not touch it. His every muscle tensed, but he did not quite blow up again. "Machine tools," he grated. "You know damn well money's no good on them."

"Money alone, no." DuQuesne agreed equably. "That's why I'm having you apply pressure. You'll get the details — orders, specs, times and places of delivery, and so forth — by registered mail tomorrow morning. Shall I spell out the 'or else' for you?"

Brookings was quivering with rage, but there wasn't a thing in the world he could do about the situation and he knew it. "Not for me," he managed finally, "but I'd better record it for certain people who will have to know."

"Okay. Any mistake in any detail of the transaction or one second more than twenty-four hours' delay in any specified time of delivery will mean a one-hundred-kiloton superatomic on North Africa Number Eleven. Good-by."

And DuQuesne cut his projection. To Brookings, he seemed to vanish; to DuQuesne himself, he simply was back in his own *Capital D*, far out in space; and DuQuesne allowed himself to smile.

Things were going rather well, he thought. Seaton was tangled up with whoever the new enemy had turned out to be; might well be dead; at any rate, was not a factor he, DuQuesne, needed currently to take into his calculations. By the time Seaton was back in circulation DuQuesne should have his new ship and be ready to handle him. And from then on . . .

From then on, thought DuQuesne, it was only a short step to his rightful, inevitable destiny: *His* universe. No one able to contest his mastery. — So thought DuQuesne, who at that point in time knew nearly every factor that bore upon his plans, and had carefully and correctly evaluated them all. He knew about the Llurdi and the Jelmi; he knew that Seaton and the Chlorans were, from his point of view, keeping each other neutralized; he knew that

the Norlaminians, even, were unlikely to cause him any trouble. DuQuesne really knew all the relevant facts but one — or, you might say, two. These two facts were a very long distance away. One was a young girl. The other was her mother.

Two individuals out of a universe! Why, even if DuQuesne had known of their existence, he might have discounted their importance completely. In which he would have been — completely — wrong.

## XVI

### Humanity Triumphant, Not Inc

Since Seaton as Ky-El Mokak was not the least bit fussy, he accepted the first house that Prenk showed him. His honor offered also — with a more than somewhat suggestive expression — to send him a housekeeper, but Seaton declined the offer with thanks; explaining that that could wait until he got himself organized and could do a little looking around for himself.

Prenk gave Seaton a handful of currency and a ground-car — one of Prenk's own, this; a beautifully streamlined, beautifully kept little three-wheeled jewel of a ground-car — told him where the shopping-centers were, and went back to City Hall.

Seaton bought a haircut and a shave, a couple of outfits of clothing, and some household supplies, which he took out to his new home and stowed away.

By that time it was the local

equivalent of half-past three, and the shifts changed at four o'clock; wherefore he drove his spectacular little speedster six miles up-canyon to the uraninite mine that was the sole reason for the town's existence. Since he did not want to be shot out of hand, he did not dare to be late or to do anything unusual, either during the five-mile train-ride along the main tunnel or during the skip-ride down to the eighty-four-hundred-foot level where he was to work.

Once in the stope itself, however, he stopped — exactly thirteen feet short of the stiffly erect young overseer — and stood still while his shiftmates picked up their tools and started for the hanging wall — the something-more-than-vertical face of the cavernous stope — to begin their day's work.

The overseer was a well-fed young man, and the second native Seaton had seen who looked more than half alive. His jacket, breeches and boots were as glossily black as his crash-helmet was glossily white. He was a very proud young man, and arrogant. His side-arm hung proudly at his hip. His bull-whip coiled arrogantly ready for instant use.

This wight stared haughtily at Seaton for a moment, and began to swell up like a pouter pigeon. Then, as Seaton made an unmistakable gesture at him, he went into smoothly violent action.

"Oh, you're the wilder!" he snarled, and swung the heavy blacksnake with practised ease.

But Seaton had known exactly what to expect and he was ready for

it. He ducked and sidestepped with the speed and control of the trained gymnast that he was; he handled the short, thick club that had been in his sleeve as though it were the wand of the highly skilled prestigitator that he was. Thus, in the instant that the end of the lash curled savagely around the hickory he swung it like a home-run hitter swings a bat — and caught the blacksnake's heavy, shot-loaded butt on the fly in his right hand.

The minion went for his gun, of course, but Seaton's right arm was already swinging around and back, and as gun cleared holster the bull-whip's vicious tip snapped around both gun and hand with a pistol-sharp report. The trooper stared, for an instant stunned, at the blood spurting from his paralyzed right hand; and that instant was enough. Seaton stepped up to him and put his left fist deep into his midsection. Then, as the half-conscious man began to double over, he sent his right fist against its preselected target. Not the jaw — he didn't want to break his hand — the throat. Nor did he hit him hard; he didn't want to kill the guy, or even damage him permanently.

As the man fell to the hard-rock floor — writhing in agony, groaning, strangling and gasping horribly for breath — the men and women and teen-agers looking on burst as one into clamor. "Stomp 'im!" they shrieked and yelled. "Give 'im the boots! Stomp 'im! Kill 'im! Stomp 'is head clean off! Stomp 'im right down into the rock!"



"Hold it!" Seaton rasped, and the miners fell silent; but they did not relapse into their former apathy.

Seaton stood by, waiting coldly for his victim to be able to draw a breath. He picked the overseer's pistol-like weapon up and looked it over. He had never seen anything like it before, and casual inspection didn't tell him much about how it worked, but that could wait. He didn't intend to use it. In fact, he wasn't really interested in it at all.

When the overseer had partially recovered his senses, Seaton jammed a headset onto his head and thought viciously at him; as much to give him a taste of real punishment as to find out what he knew and to impress upon his mind exactly what he had to do if he hoped to keep on living. Then Seaton made what was for him a speech. First, to the now completely deflated officer:

"You — you slimy traitor, you stinking turncoat, you *quisling!* Know now that a new regime has taken over. Maybe I'll let you live and maybe I'll turn you over to these boys and girls here — you know what they'd do to you. That depends on how *exactly* you stick to what I just told you. One thought of a squeal — if you ever get one milli-meter out of line, and you'll be under surveillance every second of every day — you'll die a long, slow, tough death. And I mean *tough!*"

He turned to the miners; studied them narrowly. His "shot in the arm" had done them a lot of good. Excitement was still high; none of them had relapsed into the apathy that had affected them all such a

short time before. In fact, one close-clustered group of men was eyeing Seaton and the overseer in a fashion that made it perfectly clear that, had it not been for Seaton's mien and the gun and the whip, there would have been a lynching then and there.

"Take it easy, people," Seaton told them. "I know you all want to tear this ape apart, but what good would it do? None. Not a bit. So I won't let you do it, if I have to use the whip and even the gun to keep you from it. But I don't intend to use either whip or gun and I don't think I'll have to, because this is the first bite of a fresh kettle of fish for every civilized human being of this world. I won't go into much detail, but I represent a group of human beings, as human as yourselves, called HUMANITY TRIUMPHANT. I'm a fore-runner. I'm here to bring you a message; to tell you that humanity has never been conquered permanently and never will be so conquered. Humanity has triumphed and will continue to triumph over all the vermin infesting all the planets of all the solar systems of all the galaxies of all surveyed space.

"HUMANITY TRIUMPHANT's plans have been made in full and are being put out into effect. Humanity will win here, and in not too long a time. Every Chloran in every solar system in this region of space will die. That's a promise.

"Nor do we need your help. All we ask you is that you produce the full quota of ore every week, so that no Chloran warship will come here too soon. And that production

will be no problem very shortly, since I can repair your machinery and will have it all back in working order by one week from today. So in a very few weeks you women can go back to keeping house for your families; you youngsters can go back to school; and half of you men will be able to make quota in half a shift and spend the other half of it playing penny-ante. And you, Brother Rat—" he turned back to the deposed overseer—"you can peel that pretty uniform. You're going to work, right now. You and I are going to be partners—and if you so much as begin to drag your feet I'll slap your face clear around onto the back of your neck. Let's go!"

They went. They picked up a drill—which weighed all of three hundred pounds—and lugged it across the rough rock floor to the foot of the face; which, translated from the vernacular, means the lower edge of the expanse of high-grade ore that was being worked.

It was a beautiful thing, that face; a startlingly high and wide expanse of the glossly, lustrous, submetallic pitch black of uraninite; slashed and spattered and shot through at random with the characteristic violent yellows of autunite and carnotite and the variant greens of torbernite.

But Seaton was not particularly interested in beauty at the moment. What he *hoped* was that he could keep from giving away the fact that this was the first time he had ever handled a mining machine of any kind or type. He thought he could, however, and he did.

For, after all, there are only so many ways in which holes can be made in solid rock. Second, since the hard-rock men who operate the machinery to make those holes are never the greatest intellects of any world, such machinery must be essentially simple. And third, the Brain's visualizations had been very complete and Richard Seaton was, as he had admitted to Prenek, an exceptionally smart man.

Wherefore, although Seaton unobtrusively let the ex-overseer take the lead, the two men worked very well together and the native did not once drag his feet. They set up the heavy drill and locked it in place against the face. They slipped the shortest "twelve-inch" steel into the chuck and rammed it home. They turned on the air and put their shoulders to the stabilizing pads—and that monstrous machine, bellowing and thundering under the terrific urge of two hundred pounds to the square inch of compressed air, drove that heavy bit resistlessly into the ore.

And the rest of the miners, fired by Seaton's example as well as by his "shot in the arm", worked as they had not worked in months; to such good purpose that when the shift ended at midnight the crew had sent out almost twice as much high-grade ore as they had delivered the night before.

It need hardly be mentioned, perhaps, that Seaton was enjoying himself very much. Although he was not, in truth, the "big, muscle-bound ape—especially between the ears" he was wont to describe himself as,

there was certainly a pleasure in being up against the sort of problem that muscle and skill could settle. For a time he was concerned about the fact that events elsewhere might be proceeding at a pace he could not control; but there was not a minute spent on the surface of this planet that was not a net gain in terms of the automatic repair of the *Valeron*. That great ship had been hurt. Since there was at the moment very little that Seaton could do effectively about DuQuesne, or directly about the Chlorans, or the Fenachrone—and was a great deal he could do here on the surface of Ray-See-Nee—he put the other matters out of his mind and did what had to be done.

And enjoyed it enormously!

Seaton went "home" to the empty and solitary house that was his temporary residence and raised the oversize ring to his lips. "Dottie," he said.

"Oh, Dick!" a tiny scream came from the ring. "I wish you wouldn't take such horrible chances! I thought I'd die. Won't you, tomorrow morning, just shoot the louse out of hand? Please?"

"I wasn't taking any chances, Dot; a man with half my training could have done it. I had to do something spectacular to snap these people out of it; they're dead from the belt-buckle up, down, and back. But I've done enough, I think, so I won't have any more trouble at all. It'll get around—and how!—and strictly on the Q and T. All those other apes will need is a mere touch of fist."

"You hope. Me, too, for that mat-

ter. Just a sec, here's Martin. He wants to talk to you about that machinery business," and Crane's voice replaced Dorothy's.

"I certainly do, Dick. You say you want two-hundred-fifty-pound Sullivan Sluggers, complete with variable-height mounts and inch-and-a-quarter—that's English, remember—bits. You want Ingersoll-Rand compressors and Westinghouse generators and Wilfley tables and so on, each item by name and no item resembling any of their own machinery in any particular. Since you are supposed to be repairing their own machinery, wouldn't it be better to have the Brain do just that, while you look on, make wise motions, and learn?"

"It might be better, at that," Seaton admitted, after a moment's thought. "My thought was that since nobody now working in the mine knows anything much about either mining or machinery it wouldn't make any difference, as long as the stuff was good and rusty on the outside, and I know how our stuff works. But I can learn theirs and it will save a lot of handling and we'll have the time. They're working only two shifts in only one stope, you know. Lack of people. But nine-tenths of their equipment is as dead as King Tut and the rest of it starts falling apart every time anybody gives any of it a stern look—I was scared spitless all shift that we'd be running out of air or power, or both, any minute. So we'll have to do one generator and at least one compressor tonight; so you might as well start getting the stuff ready for me."



"It's ready. I'll send it down as soon as it gets good and dark. In the meantime, how about Brother Rat? Have you anyone watching him?"

"No, I didn't think it was necessary. But it might be, at that. From up there, would you say?"

"Definitely. And Shiro and Lotus haven't much to do at the moment. I'll make arrangements."

"Do that, guy, and so long 'till dark."

"Just a sec, Dick," Dorothy said then. "I'm not done with you yet. You remembered the no-neighbors bit, I think?"

"I sure did, Honey-Chile. No neighbors within half a mile. So, any dark of the moon, slip down here in one of the fifteen-footers and all will be well."

"You big, nice man," Dorothy purred. "Comes dark, comes me! an' you can lay to that."

Countless parsecs away, DuQuesne made proper entry into the Solar System, put his *Capital D* into a parking orbit around Earth, and began to pick up his tremendous order of machine tools and supplies. It went well; Brookings had done his job. There was, however, one job DuQuesne had to do for himself. During the loading, accordingly, he went in person to Washington, D.C., to the Rare Metals Laboratory, and to Room 1631.

That room's door was open. He tapped lightly on it as he entered the room. He closed the door gently behind him.

"Park it," a well-remembered con-

trato voice said. "Be with you in a moment."

"No rush." DuQuesne sat down, crossed his legs, lighted a cigarette, and gazed at the woman seated at her electronics panel. Both her eyes were buried in the light-shield of a binocular eyepiece; both her hands were manipulating vernier knobs in tiny arcs.

"Oh! Hi, Blackie! Be with you in half a moment."

"No sweat, Hunkie. Finish your obs."

"Natch." Her attention had not wavered for an instant from her instruments; it did not waver then.

In a minute or so she pressed a button, her panel went dark, and she rose to her feet. "It's been a long time, Blackie," she said, stepping toward him and extending her hand.

"It has indeed." He took her hand and began an encircling action with his left—a maneuver which she countered, neatly but still smilingly, by grasping his left hand and holding it firmly.

Tsk. tsk," she tsked. "The merchandise is on display, Blackie, but it is not to be handled. Remember?"

"I remember. Still untouchable," he said.

"That's right. You're a hard-nosed, possessive brute, Blackie—any man to interest me very much would have to be, I suppose—but no man born is ever going to tell me what I can or can't do. Selah. But let's skip that." She released his hands, waved him to a chair, sat down, crossed her legs, accepted the lighted cigarette he handed her, and went on, "Thanks. The gossip was that you

were all washed up and had, as Ferdy put it, 'taken it on the lam.' I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now. I've been wanting to tell you; you're a good enough man so that whatever you're really after, you'll get."

This woman could reach DuQuesne as no other woman ever had. "Thanks, Hunkie," he said; and, reaching out, he pressed her right hand hard then dropped it. "What I came up here for—have you a date for Thursday evening that you can't or won't break?"

Her smile widened; her two lovely dimples deepened. "Don't tell me; let me guess. Louisa Vinciughi in *Lucia*."

"Nothing else but. You like?"

"I love. With the usual stipulation—we 'Dutch' it."

"Listen, Hunkie!" he protested. "Aren't you ever going to get off of that 'Dutch' thing? Don't you think a man can take a girl out without having monkey-business primarily in mind?"

She considered the question thoughtfully, then nodded. "As stated, yes. Eliding the one word 'primarily', no. I've heard you called a lot of things, my friend, but 'stupid' was never one of them. Not even once."

"I know." DuQuesne smiled, a trifle wryly. "You are not going to be obligated by any jot or iota or tittle to any man living or yet to be born."

Her head went up a little and her smile became a little less warm. "That's precisely right, Marc. But

I've never made any secret of the fact that I enjoy your company a lot. So, on that basis, okay and thanks."

"On that basis, then, if that's the way it has to be, and thanks to you, too," DuQuesne said, and took his leave.

And Thursday evening came; and all during that long and thoroughly pleasant evening the man was, to the girl's highly sensitive perception . . . well, different, although very subtly so. He was not quite, by some very small fraction, his usual completely poised and urbane self. Even Vinciughi's wonderful soprano voice did not bring him entirely back from wherever it was he was. Wherefore, just before saying goodnight at the door of her apartment, she said:

"You have something big on your mind, Blackie. Tremendously big. Would it help to come in and talk a while?" This was the first time in all their long acquaintance that she had ever invited him into her apartment. "Or wouldn't it?"

He thought for a moment. "No," he decided. "There are so many maybes and ifs and buts in the way that talking would be even more futile than thinking. But I'd like to ask you this: how much longer will you be here in Washington, do you think?"

She caught her breath. "The Observer says it'll take me a year and and half to get what I should have."

"That's fine," DuQuesne said. His thoughts were racing, but none of them showed. What were those observers doing? And why? He knew the kind of mind Stephanie de Mar-

igny had—they were feeding with a teaspoon a mind fully capable of gulping it down by the truckload . . . why? *Why?* So as not to play favorites, probably—that was the only reason he could think of. DuQuesne was playing for very high stakes; he could not afford to overlook any possibility, however remote. Had his interest in Hunkie de Marigny been deduced by the Norlaminians? Was it, in fact, possible—even likely—that he was under observation even now? Was their strange slowdown in her training meaningful? He could not answer; but he decided on caution. He went on with scarcely a noticeable pause, "I'll see you well before that—if I may?"

"Why, of course you may! I'd get an acute attack of the high dudgeons if you *ever* came to Washington without seeing me!"

He took his leave then, and she went into her apartment and closed the door . . . and stood there, motionless, listening to his receding footsteps with a far-away, brooding look in her deep brown eyes.

## XVII

### The Coup

As the days had passed, more and more of the Skylarkers had come to ground in Seaton's temporary home on the planet Ray-See-Nee; until many of them, especially Dorothy, were spending most of their nights there. On this particular evening they were all there.

Since the personal gravity-controls had been perfected long since,

Dunark and Sitar were comfortable enough as far as gravity was concerned. The engineers, however, had not yet succeeded in incorporating really good ambient-atmosphere temperature-controllers into them; wherefore he was swathed in wool and she wore her fabulous mink coat. They each wore two Osnömian machine pistols instead of one, and they sat a couple of feet apart—in instant readiness for any action that might become necessary.

Lotus and Shiro, a little closer together than the two Osnömians but not enough so to get into each other's way, sat cross-legged on the floor. He was listening intently, while she wasn't. Almost everything that was being said was going completely over her head.

Dorothy, Margaret, and Crane sat around a small table, fingering tall glasses in which ice-cubes tinkled faintly.

Seaton paced the floor, with his right hand in his breeches pocket and his left holding his pipe, which he brandished occasionally in the air to emphasize a point.

"Considering that we can't do anything at all on unmuffled high-order stuff except when an ore-scow is here, masking our emanations," Seaton was saying, "we haven't done too bad. However, I wouldn't wonder if we'd just about run out of time and we're right between the devil and the deep blue sea. Mart, what's your synthesis?"

Crane sipped his drink and cleared his throat. "You're probably right in one respect, Dick. They apparently make a spectacle of these de-

structions of cities; not for the Chlorans' amusement—I doubt very much if they enjoy or abhor anything, as we understand the term—but to keep the rest of the population of this world in line. Whether or not the quisling dictator of this world arranged for this city to be the next sacrifice, it is certain that we have interfered with the expected course of events to such an extent that the powers-that-be will at least investigate. But I can't quite see the dilemma."

"I can," Dorothy said. "They *have* to have a grisly example, once every so often; and since this one didn't develop on schedule maybe they'll go crying to mama instead of trying to handle us themselves. You see, they may know more about us than we think they do."

"That's true, of course—" Crane began, but Seaton broke in.

"So I say it's time to let Ree-Toe Prenk in on the whole deal and add him to our Council of War," he declared, and talk went on.

They were still discussing the situation twenty minutes later, when someone tapped gently on the front door.

**T**he Osnomians leaped to their feet, pistols in all four hands. The two Japanese leaped to their feet and stood poised, knees and elbows slightly flexed, ready for action. Forty-five-caliber automatics appeared in the hands of the three at the table, and Crane flipped his remote control helmet onto his head. Seaton, magnum in hand, snapped on the outside lights and peered out

through the recently installed one-way glass of the door.

"Speak of the devil," he said in relief. "It's Hizzoner." He opened the door wide and went on, "Come in, Your Honor. We were just talking about you."

Prenk came in, his eyes bulging slightly at the sight of the arsenal of armament now being put back into holsters. They bulged still more as he looked at the Japanese, and he gulped as he stared fascinatedly at the green-skinned Osnomians.

"I knew, of course, within a couple of days," Prenk said then, quietly, "that you who call yourself Ky-El Mokak were not confining your statements to the exact truth. No wilder could possibly have done what you were doing; but by that time I knew that you, whoever you were, were really on our side. I had no suspicion until this moment, however, that you were actually from another world. I thought that your speech to the miners was what you said it was going to be, 'a shot in the arm of hope'. It now seems more than slightly possible that you were talking about the very matters I came here tonight to see you about. Certain supplies, you will remember."

"I remember. I lied to you, yes. Wholesale and retail. But how else could I have made the approach, the mood you were in, without blowing everything higher than up?"

"Your technique was probably the best possible, I admit."

"Okay. Yes, we're from a galaxy so far away from here that you could barely find it with the biggest

telescope this world ever had. Our business at the moment is to wipe out every Chloran in this region of space, but we can't do it without — among other things — a lot more data than we now have. And we'll need weeks of time, mostly elsewhere, for preparation.

"But before we go too deeply into that you must meet my associates. People, this is His Honor Ree-Toe Prenk; what you might call the Mayor of the City of Ty-Ko-Ma of the Planet Ray-See-Nee. You know all about him. Ree-Toe, this is Hi-Fi Mokak, my wife — Lo-Test and Hi-Test Crane, husband and wife —" and he went on with two more pairs of coined names.

"Hi-Fi indeed!" Dorothy snorted, under her breath, in English. "Just you wait 'til I get you alone tonight, you egregious clown!"

"Wha'd'ya mean 'clown'?" he retorted. "Try *your* hand sometime at inventing seven names on the spur of the moment!"

Seaton then put on a headset, slipped one over Prenk's head, and said in thought: "This is what is left — the residue, you might say — of our mobile base the *Skylark of Valeron*," and went on to show him and to describe to him the Great Brain, the immense tank-chart of the entire First Universe, the tremendous driving engines and even more tremendous engines of offense and of defense.

Prenk was held spellbound and speechless, for this "residue", hundreds of kilometers in diameter and hundreds of millions of tons in

weight, was so utterly beyond any artificial structure Prenk had ever imagined that he simply could not grasp its magnitude at all. And when Seaton went on to show him a full mental picture of what that base had been before the battle with the Chlorans and what it would have to be before they could begin to move against the Chlorans — the one-thousand kilometer control-circles, the thousands of cubic kilometers of solidly packed offensive and defensive gear, the scores of fantastically braced and buttressed layers of inoson that composed the worldlet's outer skin — he was so strongly affected as to be speechless in fact.

"I . . . I see. That is . . . a little, maybe . . ." he stammered, then subsided into silence.

"Yes, it is a bit big to get used to all at once," Seaton agreed. "It needs a lot of work. Some we're doing; some of it can't be done anywhere near here; but we don't want to leave without being reasonably sure that you and your people will be alive when we get back. So we want a lot of information from you."

"I'll be glad to tell you everything I know or can find out."

"Thanks. Ideas, first. How much do you think the quisling Big Shots actually know? What do you think they'll do about it? What do you think His Magnificence the Dictator will do? And what should we do about what he thinks he's going to do? In a few days we'll want all the information you can get — facts, names, dates, places, times, and personnel. Also one sample copy

of each and every item of equipment desired; with numbers wanted and times and places of delivery. Brother Prenk, you have the floor."

"One advantage of a small town and a group like ours," Prenk said, slowly, "is that everybody knows everybody else's business. Thus, we all knew who the spies were, but the people were all so low in their minds that they simply did not care whether they lived or died. We had done our best and had failed; most of us had given up hope completely. Now, however, the few remaining spies have been locked up and are under control. They and the overseers are still reporting, but —" he smiled wolfishly—"they are saying precisely and only what I tell them to say. This condition can't last very long; but, after what you just showed me, I'm pretty sure I can make it last long enough. We have organized a really efficient force of guerilla fighters and our plans for the capital are . . ."

A couple of weeks later, then, three hundred fifty-eight highly trained men and one highly trained woman set out.

A woman? Yes. Dorothy had protested vigorously.

"But Sitar! *You* aren't going, surely? *Surely* you're staying home?"

"*Staying home!*" the green girl had blazed. "The First Wife of a prince of Osnome goes with her prince wherever he goes. She fights beside him, at need she dies beside him. Would you have him die fighting and me live an hour? I'd blow myself to bits!"

"My God!" Dorothy had gasped, and had stared, appalled.

"That's right," Seaton had told her. "Their ethics, mores and customs differ more than somewhat from ours, you know." And nothing more had been said about Sitar being a member of the Expeditionary Force.

Prenk's guerrillas had infiltrated the capital city by ones and twos; no group ever larger than two. Each one wore the costume of an easily recognizable class of citizen. They were apparently artisans and workmen, soldiers, sailors, clerks, businessmen, tycoons of industry. Nor were the watches they all wore on their wrists any more alike than were their costumes — except in one respect. They all told the same time, to the tenth of a split second, and they all were kept in sync by pulses from a tiny power-pack that had been hidden in a tree in the outskirts of the city.

At time zero minus thirty minutes, three hundred fifty-nine persons began to enter into and to distribute themselves throughout an immense building that resembled a palace or a cathedral much more than the capitol building even of a world.

At time zero minus four seconds all those persons, who had in the meantime been doing inconspicuous this and innocuous that, changed direction toward or began to walk toward or kept on walking toward their objectives.

At time zero on the tick, three hundred fifty-nine knives came out of concealment and that exact number of persons fell.

Some of the guerrillas remained on guard where their victims lay. Others went into various offices on various businesses. On the top-most floor four innocent-looking visitors blasted open the steel door of Communications and shot the four operators then on duty. The leader of the four invaders stepped up to the master-control desk, shoved a body aside, flipped three or four switches, and said:

"Your attention, please! These programs have been interrupted to announce that former Premier Da-Bay Saien and his sycophants have been executed for high treason. Premier Ree-Toe Prenk and his loyalists are now the government. Business is to go on as usual; no new orders will be issued except as they become necessary. That is all. Scheduled programs will now be resumed."

It was not as easy everywhere, however, as that announcement indicated. By the very nature of things, the information secured by the counterspies was incomplete and sometimes, especially in fine detail, was wrong. Thus, when Seaton took his post on the fifteenth floor, standing before and admiring a heroic-size bronze statue of a woman strangling a boa constrictor whose coils enveloped half her height, he saw that there were four guards, instead of the two he had expected to find, at the door of the office that was his objective. But he couldn't — wouldn't — call for help. They hadn't had man-power enough to carry spares. He'd trip the S O S if necessary, but not until it became absolutely necessary — but that of-



vice had to be put out of business by time zero plus fifteen seconds. He'd just have to act twice as fast, was all.

Cursing silently the fact that his magnum was not to be used during the first few silent seconds of the engagement, he watched the four men constantly out of the corners of his eyes, planning every detail of his campaign, altering those details constantly as the guards changed ever so slightly their positions and postures. He could get three of them, he was sure, before any one of them could fire; but he'd have to be lucky as well as fast to get the fourth in time — and if the ape had time to take any kind of aim at all it would be very ungood.

On the tick of zero time Seaton shed his businessman's cloak and took off. Literally. His knife swept through the throat of the nearest guard before that luckless wight had moved a muscle. He kicked the second, who was bending over at the moment, on and through the temple with the steel-lined toe of one highly special sure-grip fighting shoe. He stabbed the third, whose throat was protected at that instant by an upflung left arm, through the left side of the rib-cage, twisting his blade as he pulled it out.

Ultra-fast as Seaton had been, the fourth guard had had time to lift his weapon, but he had not had time to aim it, or even to point it properly. He fired in panic, before his gun was pointed even waist-high. If Seaton had stayed upright the bullet would have missed him completely. But he didn't. He ducked and side-

stepped and twisted — and the heavy slug tore a long and savage wound across the left side of his back.

One shot was all the fellow got, of course. Seaton kicked the door open and leaped into the room, magnum high and ready. The noise of that one shot might have torn it, but good.

"Freeze, everybody!" he rasped, and everyone in the big room froze. "One move of any finger toward any button and I blast. This office is closed temporarily. Leave the building, all of you; right now and fast. Just as you are. Come back in here after lunch for business as usual. Scram!"

The office force — some nonchalantly, some wonderingly, some staring at Seaton in surprise — "scrammed" obediently. All, that is, except one girl who came last; the girl who had been sitting at an executive-type desk beside the door of the inner office. She was a fairly tall girl; with hazel eyes and with dark brown hair arranged in up-to-the-second "sunburst" style. Her close-fitting white nylon upper garment and her even tighter fire-engine-red tights displayed a figure that could not be described as being merely adequate.

Instead of passing him as the others had done she stopped, held out both hands in indication of having nothing except peaceable intentions, and peered around his left side. Then, bringing her eyes back to his, she said, "You're bleeding terribly, sir. It doesn't seem to be very deep



— entrance and exit holes in your shirt are only four or five inches apart — but you're losing an awful lot of blood. Won't you let me give you first aid? I'm a quite competent nurse, sir."

"What?" Seaton demanded, but whatever he had intended to add to that one word was forestalled by a bellow of wrath from behind the just-opening door of the inner office.

"Kay-Lee! You shirking slut! How much more of this do you think you can get away with? When I buzz you you *jump* or I'll cut your bloody —" The man broke off sharply and goggled at what he saw. He was a pasty-faced, paunchy man of forty; very evidently self-indulgent and as evidently completely at a loss at the moment.

"Come in, Bay-Lay Boyn," Seaton said. "Slowly, if you don't want your brains to decorate the ceiling. Did you ever see a man shot in the head with a magnum pistol?"

The man gulped and licked his lips. The girl broke the very short silence. "Whatever you do to that poisonous slob, sir, I hope it's nothing trivial. I'd love to see his brains spattered all over the ceiling and I'd never let them be washed off. I'd look up at them week after week and gloat."

"Kay-Lee dear, you don't mean that! You *can't* mean it!" the man implored. "Do something! *Please* do something! I'll double your salary — I'll make you a First — I'll give you a diamond necklace — I'll —"

"You'll shut your filthy lying mouth, *Your Exalted*," she said — quietly, but with an icily venomous

contempt that made Seaton stare. "I've taken all the rāps for you I'm ever going to." She turned to Seaton. "Please believe, sir, that no matter who your people are or what you do, any possible change will be for the better. And I remind you — if you don't want to fall flat on your face from weakness you'll let me dress that wound."

"I wouldn't wonder," Seaton admitted. "Blood's running down into my shoes already and it's beginning to hurt like the devil. So get your kit. But before you start on me we'll use some three-inch bandage to lash that ape's hands around that pillar there."

That done, Seaton peeled to the waist and the girl went expertly to work. She sprayed the nasty-looking wound, which was almost but not quite a deep but open groove, with antiseptic and with coagulant. She cross-taped its ragged edges together with blood-proof adhesive tape. She sponged most of the liquid blood off of his back. She sprinkled half a can of curative-antiseptic powder; she taped on thick pads of sterile gauze. She wrapped — and taped into place — roll after roll of three-inch bandage around his body and up over his shoulder and around his neck. Then she stood back and examined her handiwork, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"That'll do it for a while," she decided. "I suppose you'll be too busy to take any time today, but you'll *have* to get that sewed up not later than tomorrow forenoon."

"I'll do that. Thanks a million, lady; it feels a lot better already," and Seaton bent over to pick up his shirt and undershirt.

"But you *can't* wear those bloody rags!" she protested, then went on, "But I don't know of anything else around here that you *can* wear, at that."

Seaton grinned. "No quandary — I'll go the way I am. Costume or the lack of it isn't important at the moment." He glanced at his watch and was surprised to see how very few minutes had elapsed.

"Shall I go now, sir?"

"Not yet." Seaton was used to making fast decisions, and they were usually right. He made one now. "I take it you were that ape's confidential secretary."

"Yes, sir, I was."

"So you know more about the actual workings of the department than he does and can run it as well. To make a snap judgment, can run it better than he has been running it."

"Much better, sir," she said, flatly. "I've covered up for his drunken blunderings twice in the last two months. He passed the buck to me and I took it. A few lashes are much better than what he revels in doing to people; especially since he can't touch me now. He knows that after taking his floggings I'd go under hypnosis and tell everything I know about him if he tried to lay a finger on me."

"Lashes? Floggings? I see." Seaton's face hardened. "Okay, you're it." He took a badge out of his pocket, slid its slip out of its holder,

and handed the slip to Kay-Lee. "Type on this your name and his rating and title and turn your recorder on."

She did so. He glanced at the slip, replaced it in its holder, and pinned the badge in place just above the girl's boldly outstanding left breast. "I, Ky-El Mokak, acting for and with the authority of Premier Ree-Toe Prenk, hereby make you, Kay-Lee Barlo, an Exalted of the Twenty-Sixth and appoint you Head of the Department of Public Works. I hereby charge you, Your Exalted, to so operate your department as to prevent, not to cause, the destruction of persons and of property by those enemies of all mankind the Chlorans." He stepped to the desk; cut the recorder off.

FOR the first time, the girl's taut self-control was broken. "Do you mean I can actually clean this pig-sty up?" she demanded, tears welling into her eyes. "That you actually *want* me to clean it up?"

"Just that. You'll be briefed at a meeting of the new department heads late this afternoon. In the meantime start your house-cleaning as soon as you like after your people get back from lunch; and I don't have to tell you how to act. Have you got or can you get a good hand-gun?"

"Yes, *sir*; there's a very good one — his — in his desk. I was trying to get up nerve enough to ask you for it."

"It's yours as of now. Can you use it? That's probably a foolish question."

"I'll say I can use it! I made Pistol Expert One when I was eleven and I've been improving ever since."

"Fine!" He glanced again at his watch. "Go get it, be sure it's loaded, buckle it on and wear it. Show your badge, play the recording and lay down the law. If there's any argument, shoot to kill. We aren't fooling." He glanced at the prisoner. "He'll be out of your way. I'm taking him downstairs pretty soon to answer some questions."

"I — I thank you, sir. I can't tell you how much. But you — I mean . . . well, I —" the girl was a study in mixed emotions. Her nostrils flared and her whole body was tense with the beyond-imagining thrill of what had just occurred; but at the same time she was so acutely embarrassed that she could scarcely talk. "I want to tell you, sir, that I *wasn't* trying to curry . . ." She broke off in confusion and gulped twice.

"Curry? I know you weren't. You aren't the toadying type. That's one reason you got it — but just a second."

He looked again at his watch and did not put it down; but in a few seconds raised the ring to his lips and asked, "Are you there, Ree-Toe?"

"Here, Ky-El," the tiny ring-voice said.

"Mission accomplished, including selection and installation of department head."

"Splendid! Are you hurt?"

"Not badly. Scratch across my back. How're we doing?"

"Better even than expected. The

Premier is dead, I don't know yet exactly how. All your people are all right except for some not-too-serious wounds. Ours, only ten dead reported so far. The army came over to a man. You have earned a world's thanks this day, Ky-El, and its eternal gratitude."

Seaton blushed. "Skip it, chief. Any change in schedule?"

"None."

"Okay. Off." Seaton, lowering his hand to his side, turned to Kay-Lee.

She, who had not quite been able to believe all along that all this was actually happening to *her*, was staring at him in wide-eyed awe. "You *are* a biggie!" she gasped. "A great *big* biggie, Your Exalted, to talk to the Premier himself like that! So this unbelievable appointment will stick!"

"It will stick. Definitely. So chin high and don't spare the horses, Your Exalted; and I'll see you at the meeting. Until then, so-long."

Seaton cut his prisoner loose and half-led, half-dragged *him*, gibbering and begging, out of the room. Almost Seaton regretted it was over; the work on Ray-See-Nee had been pleasurable, as well as useful.

But — now he had his base of operations, unknown to the Chlorans, on a planet they thought safely their own. Now he could go on with his campaign against them. Seaton was well aware that the universe held other enemies than the Chlorans, but his motto was one thing at a time.

However, it is instructive now to see just what two of those inimical

forces were up to at this one — one which knew it was in trouble . . . and one which did not!

## XVIII

### DuQuesne and Fenachrone

**B**efore the world of the Fenachrone was destroyed by Civilization's superatomic bombs it was a larger world than Earth, and a denser, and with a surface gravity very much higher. It was a world of steaming jungle; of warm and reeking fog; of tepid, sullenly steaming water; of fantastically lush vegetation unknown to Earthly botany. Wind there was none, nor sunshine. Very seldom was the sun of that reeking world visible at all through the omnipresent fog, and then only as a pale, wan disk; and what of its atmosphere was not fog was hot and humid and sulphurously stinking air.

And as varied the worlds, so varied the people. The Fenachrone, while basically humanoid, were repulsively and monstrously short, wide and thick. They were immensely strong physically, and their mentalities were as monstrous as their civilization was many thousands of years older than that of Earth; their science was equal to ours in most respects and ahead of it in some.

Most monstrous of all the facets of Fenachrone existence, however, was their basic philosophy of life. Might was right. Power was not only the greatest good; it was the only good. The Fenachrone were the

MASTER RACE, whose unquestionable destiny it was to be the unquestionable masters of the entire space-time continuum — of the summated totality of the Cosmic All.

For many thousands of years nothing had happened to shake any Fenachrone's rock-solid conviction of the destiny of their race. Progress along the Master-Race line had been uninterrupted. In fact, it had never been successfully opposed. The Fenachrone had already wiped out, without really extending themselves, all the other civilizations within a hundred parsecs or so of their solar system. But up to the time of Emperor Fenor no ruler of the Fenachrone had become convinced that the time had come to set the Day of Conquest — the day upon which the Big Push was to begin.

But rash, headstrong, egomaniacal Fenor insisted upon setting The Day in his own reign — which was why First Scientist Fleet Admiral Sleemet had set up his underground so long before. He was just as patriotic as any other member of his race; just as thoroughly sold on the idea of the inevitable ultimate supremacy over all created things wherever situated; but his computations did not indicate that success was as yet quite certain.

How right Sleemet was!

He knew that he was right after hearing the first few words of Sacer Carfon's ultimatum to Emperor Fenor: that was why he had pushed the panic button for the eighty-five-thousand-odd members of his faction to flee the planet right then.

He knew it still better when, after Fenor's foolhardy defiance of Sacer Carfon, of the Overlord, and of the Forces of Universal Peace, his native planet became a minor sun behind his flying fleet.

Even then, however, Sleemet had not learned very much — at least, nowhere nearly enough.

At first glance it might seem incredible that, after such an experience, Sleemet could have so lightly destroyed two such highly industrialized worlds about which he knew so little. It might seem as though it must have been impressed upon his mind that the Fenachrone were not the ablest, strongest, wisest, smartest, most highly advanced and most powerful form of life ever created. Deeper study will show, however, that with his heredity and conditioning he could not possibly have done anything else.

Sleemet probably did not begin really to realize the truth until the Llurd Klazmon so effortlessly — apparently — wiped out sixteen of his seventeen superdreadnoughts, then crippled his flagship beyond resistance or repair and sent it hurtling through space toward some completely unknown destination.

His first impulse, like that of all his fellows, was to storm and to rage and to hurl things and to fight. But there was no one to fight; and storming and raging and hurling and smashing things did not do any good. In fact, nothing they could do elicited any attention at all from their captors.

Wherefore, as days stretched out

endlessly and monotonously into endless and monotonous weeks, all those five-thousand-odd Fenachrone — males and females, adults and teen-agers and children and babies — were forced inexorably into a deep and very un-Fenachronian apathy.

And when the hulk of the flagship arrived at the Llanzlanate on far Llurdiax, things went immediately from bad to worse. The volume of space into which the Fenachrone were moved had a climate exactly like that of their native city on their native world. All its artifacts — its buildings, and its offices and its shops and its foods and its drinks and its everything else — were precisely what they should have been.

Obviously, they were encouraged to live lives even more normal than ever before (if such an expression is allowable); to breed and to develop and to evolve; and especially to perform break-throughs in science.

Actually, however, it was practically impossible for them to do anything of their own volition; because they were being studied and analyzed and tested every minute of every day. Studied coldly and logically and minutely; with an utterly callous ferocity unknown to even such a ferocious race as the Fenachrone themselves were.

Hundreds upon hundreds of the completely helpless captives died — died without affecting in any smallest respect the treatment received by the survivors — and as their utter helplessness struck in deeper and deeper, the Fenachrone grew

steadily weaker, both physically and mentally.

This was no surprise to their captors, the Lurdi. Nor was it in any sense a disappointment. To them the Fenachrone were tools; and they were being tempered and shaped to their task . . .

On Earth, leaving Stephanie de Marigny's apartment, DuQuesne went back to the *Capital D* and took off on course one hundred seventy-five Universal — that is, five degrees east of Universal South. He went that way because in that direction lay the most completely unexplored sector of the First Universe and he did not want company. Earth and the First Galaxy lay on the edge of the First Quadrant. Lurdi-ax and its Realm lay in the Second. So did the Empire of the Chlorans and his own imaginary planet Xylmny. The second galaxy along that false line, which might also attract Seaton, lay in the Third. He didn't want any part of Richard Ballinger Seaton — yet — and this course was mathematically the best one to take to get out of and keep out of Seaton's way. Therefore he would follow it clear out to the Fourth Quadrant rim of the First Universe.

As the *Capital D* bored a hole through the protesting ether DuQuesne took time out from his thinkings to consider women. First, he considered Stephanie de Marigny; with a new and not at all unpleasant thrill as he did so. He considered Sennloy and Luloy and some unattached women of the Jelmi. They

all left him completely cold; and he was intellectually honest enough to know why and to state that "why" to himself. The Jelmi were so much older than the humanity of Earth that they were out of his class. He could stand equality — definitely; in fact, that was what he wanted — but he could not live with and would not try to live with any woman so demonstrably his superior.

But Hunkie — ah, *there* was a man's woman! His equal; his perfect equal in every respect; with a brain to match one of the finest bodies ever built. She didn't *play* hard to get, she *was* hard to get; but once got she'd stay got. She'd stand at a man's back 'till his belly caved in.

Slowed to a crawl, as Universal speed goes, the *Capital D* entered the outermost galaxy of the Rim of the Universe and DuQuesne energized his highest-powered projector. He studied the Tellus-Type planets of hundreds of solar systems. Many of these planets were inhabited, but he did not reveal himself to the humanity of any of them.

He landed on an uninhabited planet and went methodically to work. He bulldozed out an Area of Work. He set up his batteries of machine tools; coupling an automatic operator of pure force to each tool as it was set up. Then he started work on the Brain; which took longer than all the rest of the construction put together. It was an exact duplicate of that of the *Skylark of Valeron*; one cubic mile of tightly packed ultra-miniaturized components; the most tremendous and most tremen-

dously capable super-computer known to man.

While the structure of the two brains was identical, their fillings were not. As has been said, there were certain volumes — blocks of cells — in the *Valeron's* brain that DuQuesne had not been able to understand. These blocks he left inoperative — for the time being. Conversely, DuQuesne either had or wanted powers and qualities and abilities that Seaton neither had nor wanted; hence certain blocks that were as yet inoperative in Seaton's vast fabrication were fully operative in DuQuesne's.

It is a well-known fact that white-collar men, who sit at desks and whose fellowship with machines is limited to week-end drives in automobiles, scoff heartily at the idea that any two machines of the same make and model do or can act differently from each other except by reason of wear. With increasing knowledge of an acquaintance with machines, however — especially with mechanisms of the more complex and sophisticated sorts — this attitude changes markedly. The men and women who operate such machines swear unanimously that those machines do unquestionably have personalities; each its unique and peculiar own.

Thus, while the fact can not be explained in logical or "common" sense terms, those two giants brains

were as different in personality as were the two men who built them.

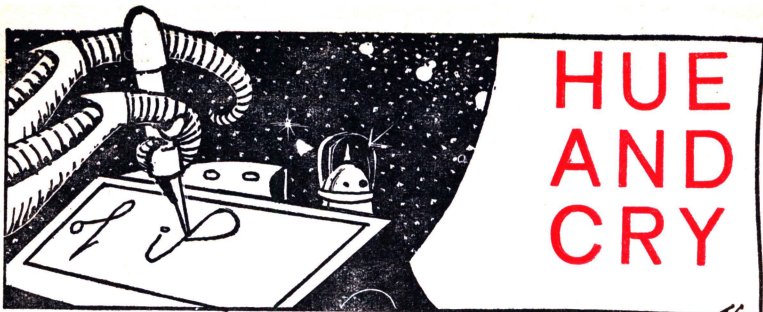
Nor was DuQuesne's worldlet, which he named the *DQ*, very much like the *Skylark of Valeron* except in shape. It was bigger. Its skin was much thicker and much denser and much more heavily armed. The individual mechanisms were no larger — the *Valeron's* were the biggest and most powerful that DuQuesne knew how to build — but there were so many of them that he was pretty sure of being safe from anyone. Even from whoever it was that had mauled the *Valeron* so unmercifully — whom he, DuQuesne, did not intend to approach. Ever.

It was, in fact, his prayerful hope that both mauler and maulee — Seaton himself — would ultimately emerge from that scuffle whittled down to a size where he would not have to consider them again.

He did not, in fact, consider them; nor did he consider the captive Fenachrone in the pens of Llordiax; nor the Jelmi; nor — and this, perhaps, was his greatest mistake — did he consider, because he did not know about, a mother and daughter of whose existence neither he nor any other Tellus-type human being had yet heard.

He simply built himself the most powerspace vessel he could imagine, armed it, launched it . . . and set out to recapture the Universe Seaton had once taken away from him.

TO BE CONTINUED



## The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet . . .

Dear Editor:

I'm afraid this is going to be another of those rambling commentaries on just about everything—so brace yourself.

I'm glad to see you've finally started *Skylark DuQuesne*. After reading the first installment I conclude it was worth the wait. I was quite relieved to see that Smith is writing in the same general style as the other three Skylarks; it becomes Seaton and his N-order forces. Not to mention adding continuity even after a lapse of more than 25 years. One thing I've always admired about Smith (not to mention Heinlein, Cordwainer Smith and a few others) is his skill at making his civilizations detailed. Burroughs did it, but clumsily, Heinlein does it in bits and snatches, and very few others do it. It makes the story more real if it seems to have a history behind it, and this adds to my enjoyment of a story. Others may find it a waste of words, which is fine with me—it's a free country.

Which brings up a question. What would you advise to a person with a detailed and realistic civilization,

with a detailed history and culture, who lacks skill to write a really good story around it?

I'm afraid I've become a Gree fan. The series is very interesting, and if it keeps up its standards it should become a Retief-type mainstay of the magazine (or has it already?). The first story of the four was the best; I'd like to see more of Jen. He sparks up the stories a little, and makes a much better protection than a "Gunner's Uniform" when in a hive. Unless I'm mistaken, there will soon be an announcement of a novel, and in this novel Earth will be taken. Or will that be their Holy Grail? I should think Gree's forces will eventually wise up to Duke's (thrice-used) method and there ought to be some really good stories.

As to your "Out of the Idiot Box" editorial: What makes you think that by the time UHF is big and strong it won't be just as bad as VHF? UHF is not a cure-all for the ills of TV. Even at the present there are very few stations which do not rely on thrown away VHF shows and movies plus a few inexpensive local telecasts. It would take a



strong, *wealthy* organization to have the kind of network (it would have to be a network) you suggest. They would need to be strong to absorb the losses they would incur until the public sensed the superiority of their programming. Another disadvantage that must be overcome is reception. The UHF adaptors now included on TV sets bring in UHF poorly, at best. (Possibly this is a local condition, but I doubt it.) The ultimate responsibility lies with the general viewing public, and from past performance they are not going to be any help. The only thing that could be done *now* is nationalization, but that is not much of a practical solution.

The only difference between VHF and UHF is frequency, and frequency doesn't make a station good.

As for the lettercol, don't expand it, just print it in the microscopic type of the old days. That way you'd get more letters in, and wouldn't offend those who are against letters.

The rating space suggested in the June issue would be great, it's got my vote.

More Cordwainer Smith (who is he, for real?), more Laumer, more MacApp, more Leinster, more newcomers (best idea in sf history), and more you (!).

In response to David Lyon, could it be C.H. Fontenay's *Silk and the Song* he's after? They seem to be the same story. Maybe *Crystal Tower* was a long adaptation of it?

If you could improve your covers you'd improve your circulation. I think you ought to keep the style you had on the Jan. 1964 issue as a permanent fixture. At least keep a white border around the illo, and let Morrow do more of those—he's the best illustrator I've seen in

years.—David Lebling, 3 Rollins Ct., Rockville, Md. 20852.

● If you've got a good idea for a story, there's only one thing to do. Write it. It's really the only way . . . unless you happen to know a writer who's short on ideas. But with most sf writers they'd rather think up their own.—*Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I bought the April issue of *If* a few days ago, the first I'd seen in a couple of years. I must say that it is much improved. *Gree's Hellcats* was very good; how about some more by C. C. MacApp? Did he write *The Slaves of Gree*? Also, is it possible to get some back issues of *If*?—John W. Cook, Box 211, Harlem, Georgia 30814.

● Yes, MacApp wrote all the *Gree* stories—including *Gree's Damned Ones*, coming up next month. And you can get back copies of *If*, *Galaxy* or *Worlds of Tomorrow* at 50c a copy, regardless of original cover price, by writing our Back Number Department care of this magazine. Only issues for the years 1959-1964 inclusive are available at present.—*Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I've been a reader of *If* and *Galaxy* for a couple of years now and your stories get better and better.—Paul Hinds, 2207 65th Street, Kenosha, Wisconsin.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I just finished your two-parter, *The Altar at Asconel*, and thought it was fine. Let's have more of this type of story, the adventure type as made famous by Burroughs, Howard and others of their school. Keep up your good work. Incidentally, if anyone is interested I have

a fairly large stock of science-fiction magazines I would like to sell—Bill Franklin, P.O. Box 1823, Hickory, North Carolina.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I've seen how readers try to locate stories through *Hue and Cry* and I've helped two in finding them. Now I wonder if somebody might be able to help me.

I'm trying the first sf magazines I ever read. One of them had a cover showing a large, glittering diamond on which two women were fighting. The story concerned a plot by other-dimensional beings to kidnap humans by luring them into "diamonds" by sexual enticements. Once one of these "diamond" gateways is used, it takes on the look of a burnt-out fuse. An agent from a top secret intelligence organization enters the other dimension and rescues the prisoners but leaves the gate open to await a time when the aliens can be destroyed.

Another had a story called *Pink Puppy Dog* which dealt with asteroid mining. As I recall the same magazine carried stories about two men in some horrible future war killing each other over a last bit of beauty (a flower) and a time when the Earth is dying and almost depopulated and one person goes kill-crazy.

There was one about a time when the population explosion was so great that the forests were removed to house people. The hero is arrested on suspicion of killing an old man because he owned some wood but it develops that the hero could explain having wood because he had been growing a tree in secret.

Another was about the reactions of a spaceship crew to the new cap-

tain: a woman. Space travel is pictured as almost slavery. I recall that the radiation had made everybody on the ship bald.—James Edward Turner, Box 161, Pilot Knob, Missouri 63663.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Retief was the cause of me buying *If* regularly. By what lucky chance did you get Laumer to sell the Retief stories to you exclusively?—Arthur W. Jordin, 711 McCallis Avenue, Chattanooga, Tennessee 37403.

● No chance about it, friend! We saw the first one, we liked it, we demanded more—and Laumer, who is an obliging soul, has just quit his Air Force captaincy to devote full time to turning them (and other first-rate science fiction) out; so there'll be more in the future!

That would seem to be about as far as the type stretches this issue. As you Old Hands know, in each issue of *If* we bring you a story by a New Hand, a writer who hasn't ever before been published and who looks to us like someone who should be. This month's is J.M. McFadden, ex-naval officer and someone you'll be seeing again. (That's an easy prediction for us to make this time: We already own another of McFadden's stories, called *Mercury*, upcoming soon.)

And speaking of Firsts, next month we start something that strikes us as a First. If you don't know yet what it is you obviously skipped the editorial this issue. Take a look at it. We think you'll agree that if not totally unprecedented, it is at least an unusual thing for a magazine to do—and a pleasant one! —*The Editor.*

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Here are some of the famous stories that appeared in *Galaxy* in its first fifteen years. Will the next fifteen years be as good?

Frankly, we don't think so. We think they'll be better!

*Baby Is Three*  
Theodore Sturgeon

*The Ballad of  
Lost C'Mell*  
Cordwainer Smith

*The Big Time*  
Fritz Leiber

*The Caves of Steel*  
Isaac Asimov

*Day After Doomsday*  
Poul Anderson

*The Demolished Man*  
Alfred Bester

*Do I Wake or Dream?*  
Frank Herbert

*The Dragon Masters*  
Jack Vance

*The Fireman  
(Fahrenheit 451)*  
Ray Bradbury

*Gravy Planet  
(The Space Merchants)*  
Pohl & Kornbluth

*Here Gather the Stars  
(Way Station)*  
Clifford D. Simak

*Home from the Shore*  
Gordon R. Dickson

*Hot Planet*  
Hal Clement

*King of the City*  
Keith Laumer

*Mindswap*  
Robert Shekley

*Med Ship Man*  
Murray Leinster

*The Men in the Walls*  
William Tenn

*The Old Die Rich*  
H. L. Gold

*The Puppet Masters*  
Robert A. Heinlein

*Surface Tension*  
James Blish

*The Visitor at the Zoo*  
Damon Knight

*Wind between  
the Worlds*  
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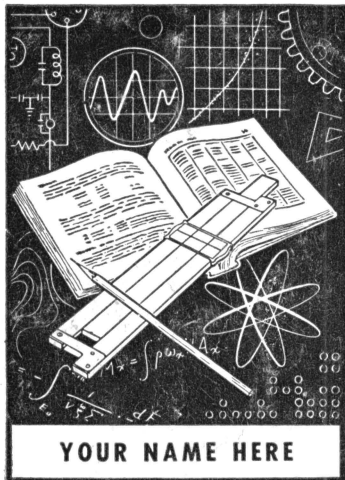
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