

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

JUNE

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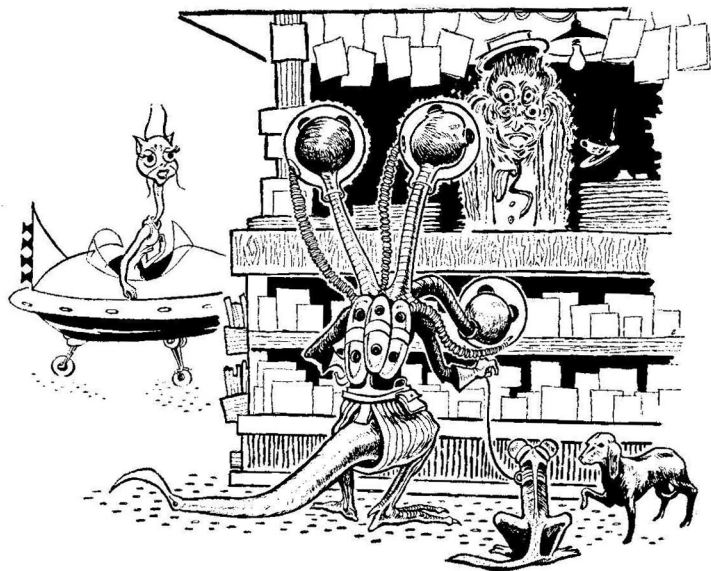
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details inside.**

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2 No. 6

JUNE, 1958

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COVER, illustrating *The Man from the Big Dark*, by Ed Emsh.

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

RECENTLY, the Purdue Opinion Panel, conducted by Purdue University's Division of Educational Reference, took a poll of 15,000 representative high school students. Among the results were some pretty grim ones:

14 percent thought there was something evil about scientists;

30 percent believed that one could not raise a normal family and become a scientist;

25 percent thought scientists were more than a little "odd";

28 percent didn't believe scientists had time to enjoy life.

The statistics are a little frightening. From all sides, we hear about the great shortage of and need for scientists. But it looks as if a good quarter of our youthful population would run screaming if they ran into a scientist on the street. If nobody is doing an anti-scientist propaganda job, certainly nobody is doing any-

thing very effective on the pro-scientist side, either.

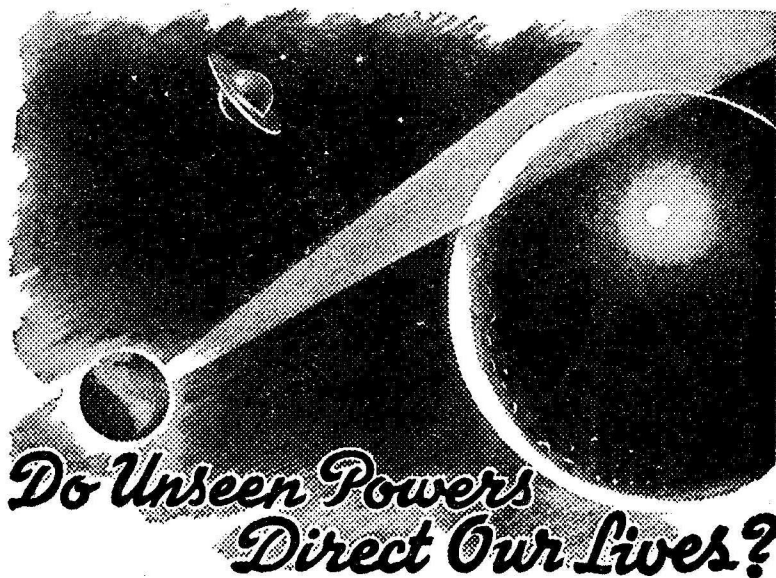
WHERE does science fiction stand in all this? Do its readers respect and admire scientists, or have they seen so many stereotyped pictures of the "mad" variety that they distrust the critters too?

If science fiction were on trial, would the verdict be innocent or guilty?

Dr. Edward H. Teller says, "You cannot have good football without having a lot of football fans. You cannot have good science without having good science fans."

It's a valid point. The next question is: are science fiction fans science fans too, or do they share in the common misunderstanding of science and scientists?

I've always felt that the only thing wrong with science fiction fans is that there aren't enough of them. But I could be wrong. What do you think?
—LTS



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(A M O R C)

San Jose, California

The Man from the BIG DARK



by **JOHN BRUNNER**

*Only one kind of man ever came out
of that gaping hole in space—a pirate.
And with a girl's mutilated corpse on
board his ship, what else could Terak be?*

Illustrated by Ed Emsh



The Man from the Big Dark

by John Brunner

PROLOGUE

THE SHIP came out of the Big Dark as if every devil in the hells of ten thousand planets were after its pilot. The captain of a fat and waddling freighter caught its blip on his fallible detectors, checked the circuits to see if they really did show a vessel making so much speed, and just had time to wish he had not decided to risk cutting direct from Batyra Dap to the Marches of Klareth instead of following the patrolled route through Mallimameddy before the pilot of the streaking ship gave a contemptuous flip

JOHN BRUNNER is a brilliant young Englishman who appears destined to take his place beside such British science fictional greats as Arthur C. Clarke, Eric Frank Russell, and John Wyndham. He can handle any kind of story with equal facility, and this time he has turned his talents to one of the most exciting action-adventures novels SFA has ever published. It's a shocker!

to his controls, and was gone in the vastness of space.

There was only one kind of ship that ever came out of the Big Dark—the hundred light-year gap which some freak of stellar drift had cut between the Marches of Klareth and the outflung arm of the galaxy. A pirate ship.

But this one must be hunting richer prey.

The next vessel to spot the overdriven craft was a naval patrol boat from Klareth, returning from a rendezvous and the usual exchange of insults with its opposite number from Mallimameddy. That was about the hardest kind of work the patrol had had in the past fifty years.

By that time the pilot from the Big Dark had deliberately overshot his goal and swung on to a course a hundred and ten degrees from his original one, which fitted the meek answer he gave to the patrol's challenge about his identity and business.

As soon as the naval craft was off the detector, however, the pilot slammed the power arm back to emergency ex-

treme and doubled towards the world which had been the seat of the Praestans of Klareth when he was only one step below the King of Argus. But that had been a long time ago.

On overloaded and almost worn-out circuits the ship stooped into the air of the planet. The long punishment he had given the vessel did not worry its pilot. It stood up long enough for him to skim through a thunderstorm raging across the trail of a forest fire in Klareth's southern hemisphere and rip apart the placid breezes of the equatorial region before hurling his ship at the largest of the wooded islands girdling the world and setting it without a tremor on the last usable port of the fifty-odd which had once poured Imperial traffic into the star-routes.

He had no papers, but he had Empire currency, of which not much was seen nowadays this far towards the edge of the galaxy. It was still good. The commander of the port fingered the two thousand-circle coins he had exacted as the pilot departed, and then turned his attention to the ship.

It was five days before the complicated locks on the vessel yielded even to his prac-

ticed fingers—he had been going out at night and unofficially "inspecting" the port's visitors since he was twenty years old; consequently, at thirty he was nearly rich enough to buy himself out of his regiment and retire.

By the time they discovered the girl's body lying mutilated on the bunk, therefore, the pilot was lost among the people of the islands—and assuredly he would never be so foolish as to come back.

CHAPTER I

THE DOCKSIDE tavern had been patched together out of the fragments of a building destroyed in a rebel raid a few years before. It looked as if one good blow from off the ocean would dismantle it again. But the smell of food which drifted from it appealed to Terak, reminding him that he had an appetite. He climbed the short flight of steps to the doorway and entered.

The only other customers were three men in leather jerkins and breeches exchanging filthy jokes at one of the tables, and a very pale man in jet black who sat alone in a corner, staring into a mug and muttering to himself.

When these people glanced

up on hearing Terak's footsteps, they saw a man of medium height with heavy, solid bones, clad in a tattered shirt of Vellian silk which had once cost a lot of money, and thick, rumpled breeches. His hair, in startling contrast to a face as brown as thakrik wood, was curly and stiff and stood up over his scalp like brass wire. He wore a sword in the Leontine style, in a scabbard behind his right shoulder, where he had only to reach up and grasp the hilt to swing it down in a killing blow.

Terak noted the calculating stares and was amused, as much as he could be amused now. He crossed the floor to the counter, moving with unexpected grace for so solidly built a man, and thumped the wood with his fist. A sharp-faced woman in a greasy apron looked out from the kitchens beyond.

"Yes?"

"What food have you? And what liquor?"

"What d'you think on Klareth? Tor-fish stew is on the fire, or d'you want something grilled up specially?"

"Stew will do me. And bread, and a measure of ancinar." "

The woman looked as if she would like to spit at him, but

seized a mug and filled it with the fuming red liquor. Then she vanished into the kitchen again, to reappear with a wooden platter full of rich-smelling stew and a hunk of coarse black bread. "Fifteen green," she said shortly.

Terak made a roll of circles appear as if by magic between finger and thumb. "What's that in real money? I don't know your local coinage."

The woman's eyes grew large with greed. "Eight circles, forty ring," she said much too quickly. Terak half smiled, and turned to the laughing men around the table nearby.

"Friend, what's a fair rate for an Imperial circle in Klarethly coin?"

The nearest of the strangers gave him a snag-toothed grin. "Four greens to a circle!" he called back. "And don't let her tell you different."

"If she makes trouble, tell her we'll take the place apart for you," added one of his companions.

Carefully, Terak set out the exact sum on the counter; a red, bony hand closed over it instantly, and this time the woman did spit at him as she turned away.

Shrugging, he picked up his platter and mug and made for

a table. The snag-toothed man waved at him. "Come join us, friend!" he invited, and Terak accepted without wanting to. Still, he might learn something from them.

The snag-toothed man hauled a chair across the floor with an outstretched foot and indicated it. Terak sat, and began to eat and drink with restrained ferocity.

"As well you spotted her trying to swindle you, friend," said the snag-toothed man. "She tried it on me once, thinking I was a fool since I was fresh back from space, but I'm as Klarethly as she." He threw back his head and laughed loudly.

Terak waited for him to quieten, his eyes taking in the way the hair of all three of these men was clipped to fit under a helmet.

"Soldiers?" he said at last.

"That we are. Avrid's my name, and these are Qualf and Torkenwal."

"Terak, I. Where are you serving now?"

"Where any good men should if they can—on our own world."

Terak nodded. "You'll be with General Janlo, then—clearing the southern islands of the rebels. His campaign must be going well indeed, that he is giving furloughs."

"Well enough," allowed Avrid off-handedly. "But how else, since he has all but a handful of the fighting men of Klareth to clear away a measly few camps of rebels." He burped loudly. "News has been off-world about it?"

Terak dodged the implied question of his origin, said only, "Travelers talk. With their mouths but not their minds, to judge by the way stories grow deformed in a few days' journey." He chewed at something rubbery in his stew.

"That's not the way I heard it," he went on. "I understood that the rebels had it all their own way, and that it was a matter of weeks until a new Praestans stood above the Marches."

The suggestion brought a torrent of indignant denial from all three of them. Qualf, slamming his open palm on the table, declared, "You must come from the other side of the Big Dark to be so out of date in your ideas! That was the way of it three years ago, perhaps, but not since General Janlo took command."

Terak suppressed a smile. He put on an expression of surprised interest and said, "What then has happened?"

"What Janlo saw," said Avrid ponderously, "was that

for too long our forces had been scattered over half the face of the world. He judged which of the rebel strongholds were the most dangerous, deployed his maximum resources against them—plus a crowd of mercenaries he got from a slaver who dropped in thinking to find easy pickings!—and rolled them up one by one instead of attempting to control the lot at once. Of course, some few of the rebel outposts which have been comparatively neglected since his campaign started have grown in size, but they have no way to get recruits and thus are merely awaiting an attack.”

“Like ripe Sirenian plums hanging from a branch for the gatherer,” said Torkenwal with relish.

“Ingenious,” said Terak admiringly. “You mentioned a slaver, though. I didn’t know such people were still working the Marches.”

“Mostly, they aren’t,” said Avrid. “But the patrols, for that reason, have grown slack and lazy.” He spoke with all the contempt of a sensible man who liked to fight face to face with his feet on solid ground. “When this one came by, Janlo had no trouble with them at all. If he had not chosen a spot where the Gold-

en Dragon brigade was mopping up an island stronghold, he could probably have got what he was after. But he had a good cargo and they made soldiers for us.”

“If he was so well stocked, why did he stop here?”

“Women, my friend. Those slavers are ever short of women.”

Terak nodded understandingly. “This campaign had been going on long before Janlo took over?”

Avrid snorted, and Qualf supplied the answer. “All of twelve years—since the death of the last Praestans. Y’see, we choose our Praestans in the old tradition—by a call of the islands. When Lukander—may he rest easy!—joined his company, the choice lay between Farigol and Abreet, his uncle and his stepson. Now Abreet was much liked by the younger sort, but he was no metal for ruling, believe me. So the call was for Farigol, though he was already an old man. But the call was near level—a hundred and six islands, was it, to ninety-nine?”

“Hundred and eight,” said Torkenwal shortly.

“So Abreet, displeased, raised his banner in the south on the island which had stood most strongly for him, and in

a while he had a rebel army near as good as the Praestans's. It stayed near as good till Janlo came along."

"And where *did* he come from?"

"So they tell me, he was a fisher and trader in his youth, who won honors fighting the occasional pirates who used to raid the ships. Most of 'em have gone with the rebels."

Avrid staged an elaborate yawn. "Getting so this planet is too dull to live on," he complained. "No pirates, no rebels—just fisher-folk, traders and woodsmen. I can see this is our last chance to serve on Klareth, friends!"

Qualf and Torkenwal looked appropriately glum.

Terak put out one further question which was on his mind. "It's safe, then, to ship among the nearer islands now?"

"Safe?" Avrid laughed. "Only danger is from the crew you pick to sail with! Ask at the docks if you seek a boat—there are enough junks, ketches and wherries making up for the trade lost during the revolt to suit you easily."

"Thanks," said Terak. He emptied his mug of ancinar, clasped hands with each of his new-found friends, and took his leave. He noted without

more than passing interest as he did so that the pale man in black was gone from his corner chair.

CHAPTER II

FILLENKEP was the largest island on the planet; it had the only decently-sized city, the only spaceport still open, and the seat of government. In consequence, the docks were large and busy, and Terak walked for a long time through them. The sun was dropping towards the skyline. He judged he had two hours to sunset—time enough, so far, but he had not had *too much* time for a long while, not since he began his journey. The journey had begun with blood, and, fate willing, it would also end with blood. Not Terak's.

He picked his way through the confusion of the port. Stacks of goods in bales and cartons and wooden packing cases were ranged alongside the unpaved way, guarded by savage Sirian apes on iron chains. The animals never seemed to learn that their bonds could not be deceived, but would wait as patiently as their brutish minds would let them and then rush out in a single instant to the limit of their stretch, hoping that

one day the restraining metal would be caught unawares. Terak gave them a wide berth, as did the sailors fresh off the junks plying between the islands who came singing up from the shore, bottles in their hands and women of easy virtue on their arms.

He came at last to a jetty, where the slow heaving of the sea had eaten the once-level stonework into subsidence, and the going was slippery and dangerous. Surefooted, he passed among the dockers, the idlers and the beggars, looking down at the moored boats. The first two he passed were fishing smacks: one back with a haul of vivid green fish, one stretching nets for a night voyage. Beyond them were three traders — junks — but since they had plainly docked together in convoy they were no use to him.

Beyond them again was what he sought: a broad-beamed wherry sitting low in the water, her decks scrubbed clean and a scarlet sailing pennant flying to advertise imminent departure.

There was a man checking goods on the quay nearby; taking him for the wherry's tally-master, Terak hailed him. "When does she sail?" he called, jerking his thumb down.

"The *Aaooa*?" The tally-master spat; he had a scar twisting the side of his face which drew up his mouth and made his expectoration messy. "How should I know?"

He went back to his counting. Terak shrugged and leaned over the side of the jetty. "*Aaooa* ahoy!" he called; the vessel had been named for the sighing wind which blew round Klareth's equator, and called for a high moaning when saying her name. There was no answer; the only sign of life down there was someone clearing kelp from the stern reactor pipe with an iron hook.

Terak looked around his feet and found a rotting fish of the weight of a katalab's hoof. He aimed carefully and let it fall so that it struck the bent back of the kelp clearer and burst asunder with a squelch. He had barely five seconds to get over his amazement before his target was out of the water and swarming dripping up the iron staples which served as a ladder on the jetty, hook wildly swinging.

Terak caught it an inch before it cracked his skull and wrenched it free. Then he waited a while to enjoy what he saw before speaking. The attacker was a girl—taller

than himself, with fire-red hair and eyes as green as Klareth's oceans. Her fine-boned face was tautened by rage into a white mask. Her body was equally beautiful, without question, for she wore the ideal costume for her watery task. She was as naked as a new-born babe.

But the urgency in his mind drove his enjoyment away swiftly.

"Answer my call next time and I won't have to do that again," he said shortly. She took half a step forward and punched — not slapped — his jaw. The blow jolted him, but he gave with it, reached up and caught her wrist, forcing her to complete the half-step, put his free hand behind her and kissed her hard on the mouth.

For a second she struggled, then yielded pleasantly. He felt her left hand steal around his waist. Releasing her, he stepped back and shook his head.

"Use your eyes," he said in mock scorn. "When did you see a man who carries his sword as I do wear a knife at his *right*?"

"Was it for *that* you wanted me to come up?" she said in a steely voice. "There are women aplenty in the port who will give you what you

could only take from me at the risk of your life."

"I'm going to insult you. It was not for that. I want to buy passage on the *Aaooa*. Take me to your captain."

The girl jerked her thumb at her perfectly molded breast. "You're looking at the captain. Well?"

Terak's surprise melted in a moment. A spitfire like this could captain any vessel he had ever heard of, he was sure. He said in a level tone, "My apologies for not recognizing you in your present costume. Does your next voyage take you towards the fighting in the south?"

The girl seemed to be hesitating between answering and turning away contemptuously. She settled for answering. "It does. Our main cargo is supplies for General Janlo's forces. But we do not take passengers, stranger. *Aaooa* is a fast freighter, and this trip I have a military contract to fill."

"Have you signed your crew for the trip yet? If not, I'll ship on your complement."

"You know the sea? You look more like a spaceman to me."

"Ships at sea and ships in space I know, both."

"My first mate is out in the town now getting us men,"

said the girl shortly. "He'll be bringing back men who are all sailor, no spaceman. Sorry, stranger." Her eyes were mocking.

"I will pay for the privilege of shipping in your crew," Terak pressed. He made a thousand-circle coin appear between his fingers and held it out. The girl swung her hand casually and knocked it ringing to the stones of the jetty. Terak did not look to see where it fell.

"That much I care for your money," she snapped. Then—"Are you not going to pick it up?"

"What for?" shrugged Terak. "It is no use offering it to you again, and if money cannot get me passage, what good is it?"

The girl studied him for a moment. "Stranger, here comes my first mate. If he has not filled all the places on my roll, you can ship with us. A bargain?"

"Agreed," said Terak instantly, and turned to see a group of hard-bitten men approaching, each carrying his bundle of belongings on one shoulder. They were a motley bunch, but they had one thing in common—the hint of a roll in their walk which indicates a man is feeling for the shift of a deck even with

solid earth under his feet.

At their head was a fat man with a broken nose and one foot chopped off short an inch behind the toes. This man the girl hailed.

"Bozhdal! Have you filled the roll?"

"All save two," the fat man answered. "We're short a deckhand and a galley-boy."

Behind him the assembled recruits to the *Aaooa* stared and shifted from foot to foot at the sight of their new captain. She seemed completely unconscious of their gaze.

Glancing at Terak, she let a hint of amusement show in her eyes. This was her chance to level with him for that rotten fish, Terak thought.

"You're big enough to do duty for both of them," she said. "What's your name?"

Terak told her. "Very well, Terak! Join your shipmates. Where's your duffle?"

"I'm wearing it."

"All right. You're my man." She swept a glare across the entire group facing her. "So are you all! My name's Kareth Var. To you I'm *Captain* Var! I own the *Aaooa* and I've run her seven times round this planet, and I know what I'm doing. Anyone who thinks different can have it out with my first mate."

Bozhdal crossed his arms

and drummed with his fingers on his very solid biceps. No one said anything.

"All right. Get below and stow your duffle. You, Terak!"

"Yes?"

"Yes, *Captain!*" said Bozhdal, stepping forward.

Terak echoed him. "That's better," said Kareth. "Since you have no duffle to stow, get over the jetty and put that hook you're holding to some purpose. I'll be down to see the job's done properly in an hour. I want to sail at sunset, so you'd better be thorough. Jump to it!"

Terak gave her a broad grin, and went over the side of the jetty before she could utter the comment that boiled up inside her.

THE WATER came up to his waist, but it was warm, and he fell to work vigorously. The hook seemed pretty useless at first, until he got the knack of twisting it half a dozen times in the matted weed. Then a single sharp pull removed the clinging stuff by the pound. There was worse in the pipe than weed, though; some sort of blue-shelled animals had crusted round the end of the pipe, and he shuddered to think what

their massed bodies would do to the jet. He hammered, chipped and levered at them with violence.

He was so engrossed that he almost failed to notice Kareth coming down to him. Wiping his brow, he stepped back in the water and looked up at her hanging on the staples in the jetty wall. She had put on a green tunic that matched her eyes, which came barely halfway down her thighs; it was the same costume that most of the sailors wore. Her waist was girdled with a belt of woven bark in which a knife was thrust.

"Good," she said grudgingly after inspecting his work. "Get aboard and help the cook dish up the night meal. And I don't want your soaking clothes to mess up my decks, or you'll have to scrub them before you sleep!"

He obeyed. After wringing out his breeches and rubbing down, he carried the fish stew in the inevitable wooden platters—since Klareth was so heavily wooded, maximum use was made of the material—into the fo'c'sle for Bozhdal and the crew. Kareth herself ate on deck, sitting on the gunwale and studying charts.

Directly afterwards, they sailed. Just before the anchor was weighed, Bozhdal went

ashore and came back with a Sirian ape which had been guarding the cargo during loading. He kept it at bay on the end of its chain with a sharp metal goad, skillfully driving it towards the stern. Wielding the goad with one hand, he fastened the chain to a staple in the bulkhead of the after cabin with the other. Then he placed the goad just out of the ape's reach.

Terak wondered why that particular place had been chosen for the ape's abode, instead of the usual cage on deck. He got his answer when he was swilling down a couple of hours later before going to his berth. He heard someone else splashing and gurgling over the side, and looked down. The light from the navigation lamps was just bright enough for him to make out Kareth rubbing herself over one-handed in the sea, clinging with the other hand to a rope. Shortly she came nimbly back up the line, wearing the same costume—or rather lack of one—as when he had first seen her.

"Good night, captain," he ventured, and was rewarded with a curt echo as she strode towards the stern cabin. Seizing the goad, she drove back the aroused Sirian ape far enough to let her get into her

cabin and slam the door. The ape dashed forward and kicked against the tough wood until it got bored and returned to its task of trying to outwit its chain.

So that was how Kareth looked after herself among a shipload of men! Terak could think of no more effective means.

The voyage was fast, as he had been promised. They beat down towards and across the equator, mostly under power, but taking advantage when they could of the aaoa wind for which their craft was named. They put in at a couple of island ports for fresh water and fruit, but most of the time they maintained a steady southward heading.

He found the work hard, but that was good, for it kept the ache in his mind down to a bearable level. He got on well enough with the rest of the crew, including Bozhdal, although he was a stranger and an off-worlder, once they had decided he was capable of doing his job. Bozhdal ran him hard when Kareth was around, but it was largely staged for the captain's benefit—she took a quiet delight in extending her revenge for that one stolen kiss.

Shipping under a woman seemed not to worry the sail-



ors; Terak judged it was because they lived from voyage to voyage, and by the time they were broke enough after their shore-leave between trips they were temporarily sick of the kind of cheating female they met in port. So long as Bozhdal—a man they respected—gave the actual orders, they could not have cared less who the owner of the *Aaooa* was.

They passed comparatively few other vessels—mostly traders like their own craft—until twenty days after they set out. On the morning of the twentieth day a fast two-reactor patrol boat raised them and ordered them to a halt for searching, and Terak knew the end of his journey was at hand.

CHAPTER III

Cut the engine!" bawled Bozhdal. "Stand by to receive boarding party!"

The crew scampered to their posts, and Kareth mounted the stern castle beside the wheelman to study the oncoming boat. She hove alongside the *Aaooa*, and a group of hard-bitten sailors together with an officer in the brilliant uniform of Janlo's forces, leapt one by one on to the slightly lower deck of the

wherry and pressed forward.

"Where's your captain?" demanded the officer, and then caught sight of Kareth aft. "Ohé, Captain Var!" he called. "What's your cargo and destination?"

Kareth came down to meet him, and they clasped hands. Signaling Bozhdal to bring the manifest and the copy of the contract, she said, "Supplies out of Fillenkep for your army, Major! We're a day ahead of schedule as yet—I hope you aren't going to make us waste it while you search us."

"Faugh!" exploded the officer. "You know me better than to think I'd search *you* for contraband, Captain Var! No, if that had been all I'd have hailed you only to be sure it was your ship and no imposter."

The crew stood around listening with ears wide. Bozhdal took notice of the fact at this point and bawled them back to their stations. "You, Terak!" he snapped. "Get below to the galley! You can stop being a deckhand for the moment."

The galley, fortunately for Terak's curiosity, had a port almost directly over the place on deck where Kareth and the officer stood. As he seized a tor-fish and began to gut it,

he caught the thread of their talk again.

"—no description of him," the officer was saying. "Of course, there's practically no chance of finding him again, unless he attempts to leave the planet and the guards at the spaceport recognize him. But five days had elapsed between his arrival and the discovery of the crime."

"What was the crime?" asked Kareth in a cool voice.

"Rape and murder," said the officer, seeming a trifle embarrassed.

When Kareth did not comment, he went on, "While you were in Fillenkep, did you run across anyone—an off-worlder—who could have been the man?"

Terak's heart stood still, and he set the tor-fish down with exaggerated care. The sword he had been wearing when he came aboard was out of reach in the crew's quarters, but the gutting knife he held would make a dangerous weapon.

"I didn't go further ashore in Fillenkep than the jetty," Kareth answered calmly. "Bozhdal did, though, to pick up new crew. Bozhdal, did you see anyone like that *while you were in the town?*"

The stress she gave to the last few words was fortunate-

ly lost on the officer, but the first mate picked up the implication swiftly. "Not that I can remember," he rumbled.

"Well," the officer said after a pause, "you can't help us, anyway. Sorry to have delayed you, Captain Var, but you are still ahead of schedule."

To the sound of the sailors accompanying their officer back to the patrol boat, Terak, his mind whirling, picked up the half-cleaned fish and methodically continued his job.

SEVERAL TIMES between then and the time they put into the port of their destination, he caught Kareth looking at him quizzically, and his puzzlement grew. It was obvious that he could well have been the man the officer was referring to, and he had expected her to turn him over with almost relish. Why hadn't she?

They docked late the following evening to the accompaniment of the sounds of battle drifting over the still ocean. The port was on a small island which Terak knew could be no farther now than twenty miles from the thickest fighting, yet life in its one town seemed to be going on much as it was in Fillenkep, far away to the north. On the waterfront,

there were even gangs of workmen busy repairing the damage caused by Janlo's siege and reduction of a rebel stronghold here a few months before. The sight shook Terak. He had not known—not really known, in his bones—that Janlo had such a command of the situation. His heart sank. Time was running very short, and he had so much to do. . . .

All the time he was busy with the unloading, he itched to be up and away, but he forced himself to sweat over the heavy bales until the job was done. It was an hour past full dark when Bozhdal judged that the work was done, and called for the hands who wanted to be paid off here instead of making the return trip to Fillenkep.

Only four of the crew made the choice, and naturally Terak was among them. Kareth brought her coffer on to the deck and set it on a small table. As soon as they had received their pay, the sailors ran to collect their stacked duffle and made off along the dockside in the hope of seeing something of the town's night life—if there was any—before it went to sleep.

"Well?" said Kareth finally, looking at Terak. She signed to Bozhdal, who shut the

coffer and carried it away. "What are you doing here?"

"I promised to pay you for the privilege of my passage," said Terak. "What's your price?"

Kareth threw back her head, and for the first time since they met, laughed aloud. She had a lovely laugh, which ran and trilled like music. Then she stretched, which made her shapely body tauten the thin fabric of her tunic. Getting to her feet, she strolled across the deck and leaned with her elbows on the gunwale, facing Terak.

"You can forget about that," she said. "You've worked hard and honestly, and I'd ship with you again any time you cared to sign."

Terak knew that the urgency of his task demanded he should waste no time standing here and listening. Yet somehow he could not tear himself away.

"You've seen a lot more of our world in a few days than most off-planet visitors," she said abruptly. "Tell me, what do you think of it?"

"I think it is a very good world," said Terak, and he meant it. The many islands in the tideless sea, crowned with their forests, and the small but busy towns on them, appealed to him. His unwilling

liking for the planet, in fact, stimulated him to his task.

"Yes," said Kareth softly. "I'm glad you said that, Terak, because I know you mean it. You know, I love this world. I haven't seen many others, but I've been round the Marches, and I've been to Mallimameddy and Batyra Dap. My father was a trader in space, and my elder brothers still are, but he loved Klareth and came home to die here. He came clear from Argus originally — then he found this world and knew it was for him. He married a Klarethly girl, and gave his children names based on the word Klareth. My brothers are called Lareth and Areth."

Terak stood perfectly still, wondering what all this was driving at.

"That's why I was so sick at heart when civil war began to tear the world apart," the girl went on, almost to herself. "And so happy when a strong man was found to put the rebels down."

Terak hardly caught the last few words, for she turned and stared out across the dimly glowing sea. There was little noise; the sound of fighting had stopped, and the town was far enough from the dockside to disturb the air scarcely at all.

Therefore he stepped lightly across the deck and came to the gunwale beside her, waiting to hear what she would say next.

After a while she turned her head and looked at him. "Terak, what do you do on Klareth? And why did you have to come here with such urgency? And why do you seem to have forgotten your purpose now?"

Terak started to answer, and then the real impact of her first question hit him. It left him as it were standing back from himself and marveling that he had had the sublime self-confidence to imagine for a moment he could carry it out. The trouble was, probably, that he had never realized just what a whole planet was.

Resolution hardened inside him. It was idiocy to think of carrying out his plan single-handed any longer. Given more time, perhaps—but time was short and here at hand was an ally he could count on.

Before he could speak, a cold gust blew up off the sea, and Kareth shivered in her thin tunic. Bozhdal, who had been making sure everything was shipshape, called out to her to ask if she wanted him for anything further. She told him no, and he picked up the

goad to lead the Sirian ape ashore and set it to guard their goods piled on the quay.

"Captain Var," said Terak steadily, "I think I'm going to answer your questions, and I think that because you love Klareth you will be very interested in the answers. But I warn you that the story I have to tell will sound fantastic, and you will probably have Bozhdal kick me over the side."

She stared at him thoughtfully for a few moments. Then she turned away. "Come with me," she said quietly and strode across the deck towards her cabin. Opening the door, she held it for him. He hesitated, but she nodded him in impatiently.

The room beyond the door was low-ceilinged and lit by a flaring lamp filled with fish-oil. There was a narrow bunk with a rich green coverlet, a chair fastened to the deck in a sliding groove, and—almost the only feminine touch—a large, handsomely framed mirror. The bulkheads were faced with cupboard doors.

"Sit down," she said, indicating the chair, and went to one of the cupboards. She took from it a large can of ancinar and two mugs. One of them she dusted with a cloth—it was obvious it had

not been used for a long time.

Then she poured drinks for them both and sat down on the edge of the bunk, facing Terak. They drank, and she said reflectively as she lowered the mug, "You know, you are the only man who has ever set foot in this cabin. Even Bozhdal has never been past that door. . . ."

She briskened. "All right. What's your story?"

"You already know," said Terak, choosing his words with care, "that I am the man from the Big Dark that officer was looking for."

"You're from the Big Dark?" Kareth tensed, and looked unbelieving. Terak nodded.

"What do you know about that part of space?"

"Only what—what everyone knows. That it's the home of pirates and slavers. The same kind of thing in space that islands such as Petoronkep used to be here on Klareth." She eyed him carefully. "Are you of that stock?"

"I was," admitted Terak without a tremor.

"You know something else about it, too, though you may not realize it," he went on after a pause. "Think back—no further than your own childhood. Did you not hear tales of the ravages the pi-

rates, and especially the slavers, caused on the worlds around here—on Klareth, and on Mallimameddy and Batyra Dap and the rest of them? Yet it was only a few hours after I landed that I heard the patrols had grown lazy through having nothing to do. What do you imagine caused that falling off in the pirates' attacks?"

She took another draught of the ancinar, not removing her gaze from his face. "I think I follow you," she said. "All right. Explain how that affects Klareth, as I presume you mean it does. I can only say that it seems very satisfactory for us."

"No!" said Terak explosively, and began to tell her why.

When he had finished, she was sitting as still as a statue, with her face drawn and serious. But her first comment was characteristically womanish.

"Poor girl! You loved her—very much?"

"I did," agreed Terak, and the admission still brought a pang of sorrow.

"I have never heard the name of—Aldur," was Kar-eth's next remark. "And I thought that the names of many of the leaders among the pirates were well known.

How is it that his is not, if he is as completely in command of them as you maintain?"

"Aldur is a very sensible man," said Terak. "He knows, as few others of his breed have done, that foolish pride has been the downfall of many before him. He does not seek a reputation which will cause children to cry at night. He desires real, absolute power—and he is going the right way about it."

And that, his mind added somberly, is the man I have to destroy before he can destroy me.

He gulped at his ancinar. Kareth said abruptly, "I believe every word you say. It is amazing. It's completely opposed to all I've thought for the last three years—since Janlo took command against the rebels—but it fits. By the winds of Klareth, it fits too well!"

"You're with me? You will aid me?"

"In every way I can," she promised, and Terak knew he had made no mistake in the choice of ally.

She got up and fetched more ancinar. While she was pouring it, he uttered the question which had been burning his mind for more than a day.

"Kareth"—he used her name awkwardly—"when that officer inquired for me, why did you deny that you had seen anyone who could be the man?"

She gave him his answer with utter frankness. "Because," she said, "I did not think you, of all the men I know, would ever have to resort to rape!"

CHAPTER IV

HE REMEMBERED Celly at the beginning, of course. He remembered her as he had last seen her when he took a final glance around the cabin of the ship. In seven days the fuse would have worn away and the inside of the vessel would have been purged with clean fire. But they had solved the tricky locks in less than that time, and other people had seen her as she lay broken on the hard, untidy bunk.

Anger burned in him, that they should know her only as she was in death and not as she was in life—alive with a vitality that shone through her eyes like a flame.

Then he remembered her as she was then—the way Aldur had seen her and desired her, and then taken her when he, Terak, was out of the way. It was known that anyone who

did more than look at Celly (for everyone looked at her!) would have a furious Terak to answer to, though it be Aldur himself—and men who had to answer to Terak usually did so with their life's blood gushing from their mouth.

So Aldur had done it—and what had it gained him? Nothing. But it would, swore Terak, cost him the empire for which he gambled.

This was Aldur: a man of cruelty who saw through shams, who had seen when he was young clear through the sham maintained in the lawless colonies of ship-born men and women yonder in the Big Dark; had seen that the degeneration was not halted, only slowed down, by the increasingly rare additions to their numbers gained by slave-raids and the occasional outlaws who came running to them and satisfied the powers that were of their genuine desire to join.

So Aldur had plotted, and because Terak had also seen that the only life he knew was doomed, he had aided him.

They had played one pirate lord against another, one slaver grown fat with indolence against another, until Aldur stood unchallenged at the head of his savage bands.

And then he had launched his plan for empire.

Too long they had lived on the memory of past glories; too long they had fed, and bred, and done nothing. Aldur said, "The dissolution of the old Empire is complete. No strong king flies his banner over Argus, the Praestans of nearby Klareth has been challenged in civil war. . . . The power that harried us out into the Big Dark has vanished. But we remain, *and we are going back!*"

The realization of the plan would be slow. Chafing and fretting, Aldur's subjects groaned at the fact, and Aldur too grew bored waiting. In the end, he signed the warrant of his own destruction — and took Celly.

Terak's mind filled with the sweet-sad memory of their first embrace, the first time she had lain yielding within his arms, and he remembered also his purpose.

And yet. . . . His arms held someone else, and something else as well. He had seen, on occasional raids, what it was like to live under open sky and breathe natural air. He had seen the people he had always regarded as fatted cattle awaiting the butchery of the pirates. And he had realized that there was a bet-

ter reason than mere revenge for destroying Aldur.

At last, as if a clean wind had swept the smell of death out of his memory, he looked directly at Kareth.

He could tell without asking that she knew what she had done for him.

He fell asleep peacefully for the first time in weeks.

KARETH brought him his breakfast of grilled tor-fish with her own hands. He imagined it was the first time she had done such a thing. Thanking her, he ate ravenously, and studied her as he ate. He did not understand her, because he did not really understand the way of life of planetary folk, but at least he knew they were both worth understanding.

"I suppose your plan was originally to kill Janlo and take the army away from him?" suggested Kareth when they had been silent a long time.

Terak nodded. "Don't think I'm stupid," he told her wryly. "But in the terms to which I'm used, it could be done. There are no more than three or four hundred thousand people yonder in the Big Dark—counting women, children and slaves. One man can

—and does!—rule them. Here, there must be many millions.”

“So now . . . ?”

“At least go to the battle-front and find out the situation before we make our decision. I fear the time is very close for Janlo to signal Aldur. Then, with all the defenses on the other side of the planet, and a horde of pretended ‘freed slaves’ to destroy them from within, Aldur can descend on the planet and take it for his own.” He spoke with bitterness, and regretted that the words brought sadness to Kareth’s eyes.

Oh, but it was a simple plan! And a masterly one!

“Then we must find some excuse for going thither,” Kareth frowned. “The water between here and Janlo’s army will be thick with patrols out to stop both escaping rebels and intruders carrying news or supplies to the remaining strongholds. My government contract was only to bring supplies this far. I had intended to return with either a cargo of timber—which is plentiful here, for the rebels have built little in three years—or soldiers on furlough.”

“We will find something,” declared Terak.

Long cogitation, though, found nothing, and when they

went on deck later there was no sign of life except from the Sirian ape on the quay, which was chattering fretfully to itself and passing the links of its chain stupidly from paw to paw. The metal made a chinking noise.

“Where are the crew?” asked Terak, puzzled.

“Bozhdal will be ashore seeking new hands for the return voyage, to replace the three we lost. The rest are below asleep.”

“Then who—?”

“Cooked your breakfast? Why, I did.”

Terak did not have a chance to utter his surprised comment, for Bozhdal came striding down the quay at that moment. With him was a tall, very thin man in jet black who struck a chord of recognition in Terak’s memory, although he could not place where they had met.

“Captain Var!” said Bozhdal loudly. “This here is Ser Perarnith, wishing to speak to you about a proposal which sounds interesting.”

Kareth nodded. “The best of mornings to you, Ser Perarnith, and come aboard!”

The man in black descended awkwardly, as if infirm, to the deck, and Terak saw that his face was old and lined.

“And to you, Captain Var,”

he rejoined, his sharp gray eyes on Kareth's face. "I understand you're at liberty."

"At the moment," agreed Kareth. "You wish to charter my vessel?"

"Yes," Perarnith said. He reached into his black garment and fumbled in a pouch; his fingers trembled a little. Terak tried to decide whether he was truly old, or simply very ill.

But the movement with which he flung open the scroll he brought out was practiced and deft. Kareth read it, and then touched the heavy seal at the bottom.

"Why, if this scroll is genuine, can you not command any naval vessel on Klareth?" she demanded.

"I wish to discover how efficiently the patrols operate—whether they are as good as General Janlo claims. I have no doubt, truly, that they are, but I wish to be *certain*. Rather than proceed to the battle-front in a naval craft, therefore, I intend to charter a private one and see how well it is challenged."

Neither Terak nor Kareth, by some superhuman effort, betrayed the sudden tense eagerness they both felt. This was a gift from the gods!

Kareth kept her voice businesslike, and said, "Your fee,

Ser Perarnith? I have only my vessel and its cargo to live by."

"Your man here"—he indicated Bozhdal—"has told me what you make on a cargo of timber over such a journey as this. I will pay double for your time in returning empty."

"Done," said Kareth, and bared her breast over her heart for Perarnith to touch it as a token of a bargain sealed. He hesitated a moment, as if he was unused to a woman performing a man's gesture, and then his thin, withered fingers rested there for an instant as lightly as the bird's claws they so much resembled.

"I am—moderately well-known among the fleet," Perarnith said after a pause. "I shall therefore not appear on deck at the time you are challenged. To the captain of the patrol vessel you will show this"—he flicked open a second scroll, smaller than the first.

Kareth took it, bewildered, and said in amazement, "It bears the signature of the Praestans himself, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Perarnith, and smiled as if with secret amusement. "When can you be ready to sail?"

"We are short three hands," said Kareth, and was about to direct Bozhdal to return on shore and round up substitutes for the men who had been paid off, when Perarnith forestalled her.

"I have a small personal retinue," he said. "Three men and a girl. They are acquainted with matters of the sea."

Bozhdal was on the point of protesting, when he realized as Terak and Kareth had at once that Perarnith had spoken in the voice of a man who was not disobeyed.

"Then we can sail as soon as they ship with us," Kareth said bluntly. "Bozhdal, go bawl out the sleeping hands!"

THE RE-ORGANIZATION was difficult. The three male slaves who came with Perarnith—big, silent men with fast reflexes and thoughtful eyes which belied their brawniness—were settled easily enough among the crew, but Perarnith could not go into a deckhand's bunk. Kareth gave up her cabin to him, therefore, and with a twinkle in his eyes Perarnith decreed that she need not worry about the girl slave—she attended him night and day and would not be in danger from the crew. That left

Kareth out in the cold—literally, for here they were beyond the even warmth of the tropics.

It almost made Bozhdal weep to see the *Aaooa* sail with a tent on her afterdeck, but it served the purpose. . . .

Perarnith showed himself not at all except occasionally after dark when he came above to walk, deep in thought, on deck. His meals were brought to the cabin door by Terak, who—to outward appearances—was still acting as the galley-boy and deckhand of the earlier leg of the voyage. The girl slave took the dishes in and returned them later, often with the meal scarcely touched.

Terak tried to sound Perarnith's male retinue on their master's behavior, but beyond repeated information about his seniority in the government of Klareth, he got only a grin and a shake of the head.

The scroll signed by the Praestans worked wonders when the challenges came up, as they did with monotonous regularity. They had only to show as a dot on the horizon to a patrol craft, and inside the hour they were under the nose of an arbalest loaded with enough liquid fire to soak them in flame from stem to stern, while fierce-voiced

officers demanded their excuse for using this stretch of ocean.

And Kareth would flash the scroll, and they would blink, step back, salute respectfully, and let the *Aaooa* continue her voyage.

After two days, they saw signs of the fighting. Men on deck with nothing to do would take their revenge on globfish migrating north to the equator for the southern winter with partly-digested human limbs still projecting from their external stomachs like extra pseudopods. One in particular among the sailors—Kareth explained he belonged to a cult which held that a man's body had to be buried or at any rate prayed over for him to achieve resurrection—was violent in his attacks on the bloated carrion-feeders.

After three days many of the naval craft that challenged them were heading north with burn-scars and ram-holes to be repaired at a refitting station. Twice they passed prize convoys, patrol vessels slowly towing battered rebel hulks whose decks were lined with prisoners in chains.

And on the fourth day Perarnith appeared without warning on deck and told

them where Janlo's headquarters was—a secret guarded jealously. It was a bare three hours away, and Kareth immediately put about for it.

As soon as they docked, harbor guards came down to challenge them. Perarnith showed his scroll, and they became obsequious. They posted a guard alongside the *Aaooa* to prevent further inquiries.

Perarnith thanked his temporary hostess, paid the fee agreed, and climbed carefully and with much assistance up to the jetty. His three male slaves followed, nodding to the friends they had made among the crew, and last came the girl slave whom they had hardly seen. Escorted by a squad of soldiers, Perarnith vanished from their ken.

This was a town which had only lately been taken from the rebels. It was scarred with the fire which was the most potent possible weapon in Klarethly timber-built cities. Tents sheltered the many soldiers and sailors who were temporarily here, though there were a few intact houses which seemed to be full of officers. It was satisfyingly small, and Terak informed Kareth that he stood an excellent chance of tracking down Janlo at once.

"How about going ashore, though?" Kareth demanded. "Will you not be challenged immediately?"

"Probably. If the worst comes to the worst, I'll have to appeal to Perarnith, but I should think that I could talk myself out of most kinds of trouble."

Hopefully, he strapped his sword into place on his shoulder and scrambled ashore.

He kept both eyes and ears open as he went along, finding that life was proceeding in a nearly normal manner. Small traders had improvised stalls out of burnt timber, drinking houses were open, the ladies of easy virtue who had survived the siege were plying their trade again among the new occupying forces, and he was astonished to see that at least one school had re-opened. At any rate, twenty ill-washed urchins sat in a ring on the ground listening to a teacher without benefit of books.

He had been walking for almost an hour, occasionally paying his respects to an officer as if he was a mercenary on Janlo's payroll, and had gained a very clear idea of the layout of the town, when there was a sudden cry from behind.

"Stop, you *Terak*!"

TERAK whirled, and was astonished to see a soldier facing him, looking like thunder. It was Avrid, whom he had met in the dockside tavern back on Fillenkep.

Avrid pulled out a whistle and gave three shrill blasts on it before striding swiftly towards Terak and sharply grasping his arm. Terak wrenched free. "What's the meaning of this, Avrid?" he demanded.

"You remember me, eh?" The soldier set his hands on his hips and met his gaze with a steely glare. Men were coming at a run in answer to the whistle-blasts, among them an officer resplendent in black and red.

"What's the meaning of this, soldier?" the latter asked. Avrid took a step back and saluted him.

"This here is an off-worlder called Terak, sir," he informed the officer. "Few weeks back they found a murdered woman in a ship new-landed at Fillenkep. I saw this man on the dockside that very day the ship had landed!"

"Off-worlder, hey?" The officer rubbed his plump jowls. "And what's *your* story, Terak?"

"I know nothing of what

this man tells you," Terak lied stonily. "When we met, I'd been five days on Klareth."

"And in those five days you'd learned nothing of Klarethly coin!" said Avrid. He explained the episode of the exchange rate to the officer, while Terak's heart sank.

"Jail him," said the officer briefly to the other soldiers who had arrived. "He can have a hearing tonight if there's time at the court."

Avrid's hand swept up like a snake striking, and the slight hiss of metal on leather as well as a small jerk told Terak that his sword had gone from its sheath. Then brawny hands closed on his arms and he was being frog-marched through the streets.

He was taken to one of the intact buildings now being used as administrative offices and handed over to a dour, dark jailer who took brief details of the accusations against him. He was allowed to keep everything he had except his weapons and the means of making fire. The reason for the last precaution he recognized soon enough—the cell into which he was then thrown, like almost everything else Klarethly, was made of wood. But it was wood as hard as stone and many inches thick.

Having explored the possibility of escape and decided that it was non-existent, Terak sat down sickly on the one piece of furniture—a rough bunk with a mattress stuffed with leaves—and wondered what would happen to him now.

Part of his answer came an hour later. The dour jailer, escorted by two armed soldiers, entered his cell and gave him a slow, searching stare. Finally he spoke.

"You're due for a hearing tonight. Before your case is called, you're allowed to call anyone you can here in town in your favor. If you don't satisfy the general you'll be shipped back to Fillenkep to stand trial there. All right?"

"I came here as one of the crew of a vessel bringing a high government official," said Terak eagerly. "She's called the *Aaooa*, and you'll find her captain at the docks. A woman called Kareth Var. She'll speak for me."

He broke off. The jailer was pointedly not listening, but gazing at the ceiling and absently whistling to himself. He caught on fast enough, and pushed a hundred-circle coin into the man's palm. Obviously, this was more than the jailer had expected, for he almost beamed after he had

made sure it was genuine.

"Anyone else you'd like to call? We can get anyone you know here."

"Are slaves allowed to give evidence?" asked Terak doubtfully. To Perarnith himself he was just another of the crew, but he had grown quite friendly with one of his male retinue.

The jailer shook his head regretfully. "Slaves will do anything for the price of their freedom," he said. "So we cannot trust them. Still, I'll get hold of this woman for you."

When the visitors had left, Terak paced savagely up and down his cell for more than another hour. Then the door of the cell slid back again, and he was escorted down a number of corridors into a room where a semblance of a court had been set up. Janlo's banner hung on the wall behind a high-backed chair, which faced a small dock guarded by swordsmen. A few curious idlers and passers-by filled rows of chairs at the back of the room.

Terak searched madly for signs of flame-red hair. He saw none. Where was Kareth, then?

His attention was distracted as a herald shouted for silence, and a door at the side

of the room opened to admit the presiding judge. Terak's heart pounded for a moment, and then he knew that he was defeated.

It was Janlo himself.

WITH A SWORD in his back, Terak was forced into the dock, and it was as Janlo settled in his chair that he first saw and recognized the prisoner. Blank astonishment swept across his face, to be replaced with a smile of quiet satisfaction as he surveyed the situation.

The proceedings were brief. "Accused is a sailor," the dour jailer announced. "Off-worlder called Terak. Charge is rape and murder." He gave details of the discovery of the crime, which he read from what looked like an official "wanted" notice.

"Grounds for accusing this man?" questioned Janlo in a soft, purring voice.

Avrid stood up in the well of the court and recounted his first meeting with Terak. After him came Qualf, and after him Torkenwal, his companions of that day.

"Good enough," nodded Janlo. "Prisoner, have you anything to say?"

"I asked for a witness on my own behalf who has not



been brought here," Terak said sourly.

"True," agreed the jailer under Janlo's questioning gaze, and described Kareth's connection with the case. "But maybe she has something to fear herself. She didn't come."

"Prisoner committed to trial at the place nearest the offense," said Janlo briefly. "Arrange for him to be sent to Fillenkep tomorrow morning."

Head whirling, Terak was hustled from the dock and returned to his cell. He felt wildly angry at the triumph now coursing through Janlo's mind. Doubtless Aldur must have warned his puppet-general of Terak's escape, and to have him arrive a prisoner in court was a gift from the gods. There could have been no doubt in Janlo's mind who was before him—they had sat opposite each other at council table with Aldur often enough three years ago.

It was worse to picture the way Aldur himself would laugh when he heard the news. . . .

He was sitting on the bunk with his head in his hands when the door opened to admit Janlo himself, together with a gigantic Leontine slave whose mouth worked in a way

that indicated his tongue had been cut out. "Well, Terak?" said Janlo with a hint of a chuckle. "What brings you here?"

"You know well enough," said Terak bitingly. Janlo nodded.

"I gather Aldur took a fancy to that attractive girl of yours. What was her name? Celly, was it?" Janlo's gaze was mocking. "Terak, Terak, I never suspected you of being a fool!"

Terak spat in the man's face, and the Leontine slave hit him open-palmed across the mouth. He was flung against the wall as if by the butt of a Thanis bull, and lay groggy on the bunk.

"Yes, your spittle is the only weapon you have left," said Janlo with equanimity, wiping away the wetness with a finely embroidered kerchief. "So you set out to conquer a world out of sheer pique, with no more powerful tool than spittle. Amazing. It shows weakness of mind—it puzzles me why Aldur trusted you so long."

He threw back his handsome head and laughed aloud. "A prince of fools!" he exclaimed. "It suits you well to be fighting on the side of these other fools who inhabit Klareth, doesn't it? So sure

that they are right, they are sensible! It never occurs to them to question whether a simple fisher could truly conquer half a planet. . . . I must congratulate you, by the way, Terak. Remember those plans for reducing an island stronghold which we worked out with Aldur when we were first preparing to take Klar-eth? They work wonderfully well, and your contribution to them is not the least important."

Terak forced himself up on his elbows and looked straight into the pretender's eyes. "You talk finely now, Janlo! You have ruled for a long time. I wonder if you will talk so gallantly when Aldur comes to claim for himself what you have sweated for three long years to win!"

The taunt struck home. Janlo's face went abruptly dark, like the piled clouds of a thunderstorm, and he swung on his heel and swept from the cell. The Leontine slave, with a lingering glance at Terak, followed him.

Terak lay still for a long while, cursing himself for a fool. If he had not let his anger run away with him, make him spit in Janlo's face, he would not have been struck stupid by the slave, and might have managed to sink his teeth

in Janlo's throat before being dragged off.

Sleep crawled over him like a horde of Loudor slugs, but he could not fight it past a certain stage. He was awakened abruptly long after full dark by the sound of the door opening.

"Out, you!" said the dour jailer in a whisper, and Terak obeyed before his sleep-drugged mind could question whether this was a dream. But it was not. In the dim light of a flaring torch beyond the cell, he made out—

Kareth!

"Why—why did you not come this afternoon?" he demanded.

"I was bringing you something better," she said. She held up a scroll. "I went in search of Perarnith, and from him I have a free pardon signed by the Praestans!"

"But—how?"

"He says he brought some with him for the freeing of prisoners known to have been tortured into aiding the rebels. Come now, though—quickly."

Terak hesitated, glancing at the jailer behind him. "Does Janlo know of this?" he said in low tones.

"No, he's feasting." Kareth could not understand why he delayed.

"Here's your belongings," said the jailer in a flat voice. He gave back the sword, knife and means of making fire which he had taken earlier. Terak gave him twenty circles and told him to get lost. Inside a few minutes he and Kareth were safely on the streets and running towards the maze of narrow streets near the dock.

In a dark alley they halted, and she flung herself into his arms. "I was so afraid when I heard they had taken you!" she whispered against his cheek. He felt unexpected wetness well from the corners of her eyes.

"How did you get the pardon?" Terak inquired gently, and Kareth stepped back from him.

"Terak, I had to tell Perarnith, of course. I had to tell him everything!"

CHAPTER VI

IT took Terak a long time to comprehend the words. He managed to speak finally. "But you were crazy! Suppose he had laughed you down and sent the report to Janlo? You would have been dead from a sword in the dark within a day!"

"Terak, could I risk less for Klareth?" the girl demanded,

and he relaxed slowly, almost with a feeling of guilt.

"No," he said softly. "There was nothing else to do. But—well, the gamble came off. Or did it?"

"Yes," insisted Kareth. "Come now, and judge for yourself. We are going to Perarnith now. He told me to bring you to him as soon as you were free."

At this, Terak hesitated anew. "This is not to my liking," he said. "Could it not be a trap? Could an official of Klareth willingly render aid to a man from the Big Dark?"

"You will see why," said Kareth determinedly, and Terak yielded unwillingly.

She led him to a small house on the waterfront, from which light seeped past the edges of curtains. A guard before the main entrance studied them as they stepped into the pool of radiance cast by a resinous torch. He recognized Kareth and saluted her, and rapped in a coded pattern on the door.

One of Perarnith's own male slaves opened to them, and when they entered the low-ceilinged room beyond, they found the man himself stretched out on a bed spread with katalab hide, his thin body naked except for a loin-

cloth. The silent girl slave was massaging him with oil.

Sharp, intelligent, his eyes transfixed them. "I see my scroll worked wonders," he said dryly. "Slave, bring these people chairs and a jug of wine," he added, and the girl rose obediently.

"We must cover this escape of yours," Perarnith went on, sitting up. "How fast can your *Aaooa* run, Captain Var?"

"No more than a freighter is expected to," Kareth said.

"A shame. Still, it will have to be tried." He paused as the girl poured and handed the wine she had found, and then continued musingly.

"Your man Bozhdal knows your handwriting? Good. Write directions to him on a scroll—you will find ink yonder. Balaz!"

The male slave at the door came forward.

"Balaz, you are much of a height with this Terak here. I want you to take his outer clothing and put on your sword as he wears his. You will take the scroll Captain Var gives you and go down to the *Aaooa* at the dockside. Go aboard. Give the scroll to Bozhdal. Tell him to leave port with little noise but with enough to attract attention, and make sure it is clearly

seen that you are on board in the guise of Terak. By the time Janlo hears of your departure, it should be accepted that Terak has left the island by that means. Understood?"

Balaz nodded. Slowly, Terak stripped off his outer clothing and exchanged it for black garments of Perarnith's which Balaz brought. Meantime, Kareth wrote busily at a small desk behind Perarnith's couch, folded the message and gave it to Balaz.

When the slave had gone into the night, Terak rose from his chair and looked down at the thin, bare body of his protector.

"Why," he demanded, "are you, a trusted official, aiding a refugee and a pirate?"

"Be seated again, Terak," directed Perarnith with equanimity. "In reality, it is quite simple. First, why do you think I have come down here to the battle-front to spy on Janlo's doings? Think, man! Is it in truth likely that a fisher should rise to conquer half a planet?"

Terak remembered how Janlo's own words, earlier that day, had presaged the remark, and began to understand.

"The Praestans, as you know," Perarnith continued, "is old and now infirm. Soon

—how soon we do not know—the question of the succession will arise. Abreet, the nearest of kin of the old line, forfeited his rights and those of his descendants, when he raised the banner of revolt against Farigol—who had gained the choice lawfully in a call of the islands, remember.

“Now it sometimes happens that a strong man, a conqueror, who has won his actual battles, looks around him for fresh victories. Do you not think that if it was called around the islands that a new Praestans must be chosen, Janlo would offer himself, and probably gain the day?”

Perarnith spoke with a fierce intensity. Terak wondered how so bright a flame of life could burn in such a withered carcass.

“Now it happens also that a general who commands well in war does not rule wisely in peace. Something which does not happen, on the other hand, is that a man with no skill in strategy save in defending fishing fleets against the love-pat raids of our Klarethly pirates becomes a great Praestans. Much of Janlo’s career has given us at Fillenkep food for thought. In fact, it worried us so much that nothing else would serve except that I myself should come

hither and evaluate the situation. What your Captain Var had to tell me is so perfect an explanation of what has happened and will happen that I could not but accept it.”

Musingly, Perarnith added, “It is of interest that no one questioned Janlo’s origin until after he had led his first great raid and laid waste the island of Osterkep, towns, forests and all, with fire. Only then, when he had destroyed all possible traces, did he claim to have been born and bred on that island.”

Kareth drew in her breath sharply. Terak knew why; it was inconceivable to her, as to any Klarethly person, that someone should destroy all that he had known as a child.

“Moreover,” Perarnith pursued relentlessly, “it was a question of surprise to us that the shipload of slaves he ‘rescued’ from their captors when they made their seemingly ill-judged raid here a while ago should have included so many first-class fighting men and military captains. Men of that caliber make poor slaves!

“It becomes clear as crystal now. At his orders, these supposed ‘freed slaves’ will resume their true identity and turn on their comrades. Meantime, while Klareth is licking

its wounds and all its best fighting men are torn apart by internecine struggle half the world away, Janlo will signal Aldur and the hosts from the Big Dark will descend on Fillenkep and the islands of the Northern Hemisphere. . . . It makes my blood run cold, Terrak. Tell me, have I understood the plan aright?"

Terak nodded. "But how can you trust me, who"—he forced himself to admit it—"who had a hand in the preparing of that plan?"

"Because I believe, with Captain Var, that you are a man who will fight for the best cause he can find. Until you came to Klareth, the best cause you knew was that of your own lawless people. Now you have found a better."

"It is true," said Terak.

"Janlo, I take it, knows who you are?" Perarnith went on after a short silence. "And will report your presence to Aldur?"

"Yes, I imagine so."

"Will he report your escape so readily?"

"Not until he's forced to, I shouldn't think. Otherwise his head may roll on Aldur's arrival—and he is very conscious of his danger from Aldur."

"Then," said Perarnith with

a smile of pure joy, "we will just wait here quietly until he is firmly convinced that you are on the high seas—I think until about noon tomorrow, when he will have sent ships in pursuit of the *Aaooa* and will not yet have heard that you cannot be found aboard her. My slaves will see you to suitable quarters. Good night to you."

And with the calmness of a man perfectly in command of the situation, he rolled over and told the girl slave to continue her massage.

WAITING was the most irritating and hard-to-bear part of the plan, though with Kar-eth for company it was easier. The first sign that they had of their scheme's fruition was shortly past dawn the next morning. Sounds of high, arguing voices came to them in the room adjacent to the entrance hall, where they had spent the night.

Terak slipped from the bed and pressed his eye to a crack in the jamb by the door. A uniformed senior officer was arguing with one of Perarnith's slaves, demanding to be taken to his master's presence.

The altercation was cut short by the materialization of Perarnith himself, wearing

a night-robe. The girl slave pushed him into the hall on a four-wheeled chair with a hood that almost obscured his face. Steam issued in wisps from the hood.

"Your pardon, Colonel, for appearing before you in this undignified posture," said Perarnith thickly. "My physicians, however, have enjoined an hour of this for me daily, to purge my lungs of the night's rheum, and I apprehend that your business is urgent."

Terak, from the time Perarnith had spent aboard the *Aaooa*, knew that this was a subterfuge. Its purpose, he could not guess.

"A prisoner committed for trial at Fillenkep was released from jail last night on a forged pardon, Ser Perarnith," the officer stated. "General Janlo ordered me to inform you immediately."

"Really," said Perarnith in faintly bored tones. "An important prisoner of war, I take it? A senior rebel?"

"No," said the officer. "An off-worlder, charged with rape and murder."

"What precautions has General Janlo taken?"

"He has ordered out all available naval patrol craft to search for a freighter believed to have taken the escaped

prisoner from the docks last night."

"Really!" said Perarnith again with slightly more emphasis. "Tell General Janlo I should very much like to know why he is wasting my time and that of these patrol vessels looking for one insignificant off-worlder who will in any case be apprehended soon enough, when there is a civil war raging." He put stinging into the words, and the officer blushed as red as the facings of his uniform. "Tell him also that I am not concerned with minor matters of this kind, and in any case they reflect discreditably on his administration of the civil affairs of this town. Get out."

"Good man," whispered Terak to the air.

"But," he remarked as he was relaying what he had heard to Kareth a few moments later, "I should dearly like to know who this man Perarnith is!"

They passed the morning pleasantly enough in talk with Perarnith, who discussed Klareth and its affairs with a knowledgeable air. To Terak, accustomed to the rule by sheer power which was all he had known out in the Big Dark, it came as a revelation to understand that the Praestans himself, here on Klareth,

being chosen by popular vote, might walk the streets unmolested and ruled with no trappings of office or authority. Almost, he did not quite believe it, until Perarnith gave him a sardonically humorous glance and said, "This applies to all officials of the government. Do you not recall, Terak, a certain dockside tavern in Fillenkep where you sat eating in the company of three soldiers from Janlo's army?"

"You were the man sitting by himself in the corner!" said Terak, thunderstruck.

"And no one knew me," agreed Perarnith. "It is not customary, you see, for any of the officials of the government to be known by sight to any except their colleagues. Every man in the army knows General Janlo, but as far as a casual passer-by is concerned, a man entering the government building at Fillenkep could be the steward of the household—or the Praestans himself."

"Yet you are well enough known here."

Perarnith shook his head. "Not I, but the documents I bear."

He pulled himself together, and ordered the girl slave to bring him a cloak. "It is time, I think," he said, "to take ad-

vantage of the panic Janlo will by now be in. It is his habit to hold a levee at noon each day, followed by a staff conference at which his officers report. I believe I should like to arrive at the opening of the levee, when some thousands of soldiers are paraded. I am invited to attend the staff conference anyway."

"But suppose I am recognized and taken?" said Terak.

"Hood yourself. To be in my company will be sufficient guarantee until we confront Janlo himself."

CHAPTER VII

AND SO it turned out. It was raining gently as they left their quarters, which suited Perarnith excellently, for, as he explained, the levee would now be held in an indoor hall and not in the main square of the town. They took about twenty minutes to reach the place.

The soldiery grew thicker as they approached, but Perarnith's slaves cleared a way for them, and occasionally an officer glanced at Perarnith, looked startled, and gave him a smart salute. Terak queried this, and Perarnith told him, "Officers visit the Praestantial court when they are given their commissions, you see.

Naturally they know me."

Obsequious aides ushered the party into the headquarters building, down passages and then out on to a balcony overlooking a hall perhaps a hundred feet square. Sergeants were shouting squads of men into a three-sided hollow square below the balcony, and bored-looking officers, many obviously fresh from the front, stood about talking.

At length a group of Janlo's personal aides joined them on the balcony, and one of them roared out a command which immediately stilled the babble of talk from below. Janlo marched forward towards the front of the balcony from the door, and as soon as he came in view, the parade saluted.

Then there was a sudden mutter of amazement, and a roar!

Bewildered, Terak saw only that Perarnith, holding himself stiffly erect, had walked to the front of the balcony and was standing alongside Janlo, who turned with a face of thunder to see the old man gazing at him with a hint of amusement.

"They know me," said Perarnith. "Is it not amazing, Janlo, that you—senior officer of our army—are the only officer not to recognize the Praestans of Klareth?"

"You—*what?*" said Janlo, comprehending belatedly.

"I am Farigol," said the man who had called himself Perarnith. "And the reason, Janlo, that these people know me and you do not, is that they, though not you, are Klarethly!"

In that instant Janlo went mad. He must have pictured his entire plan lying open and naked to the enemy. First he swung to face the parade again and screamed for Aldur's men to turn on their comrades. White-faced, a few of the officers, though none of the men, drew their swords and stood irresolute. Knowing only that this was wrong, their companions swiftly disarmed them.

Seeing that his appeal had gone for nothing, Janlo curled his lips back from his teeth in a snarl like an animal and unsheathed his knife to bury it in Perarnith-Farigol's belly. Before the blade could reach its goal, Terak's right arm had gone up—and down again—and there was Janlo's hand lying, still grasping the knife, on the floor. So swift was the blow that no blood marred the shining metal of Terak's sword.

The puppet-general gazed stupidly at his forearm, spurting blood, for a long in-

stant. Then the tremendous shock overcame him, and he collapsed weeping to the floor, trying to staunch the flow with his remaining hand. Terak bent over so that Janlo could recognize him.

"You!" said Janlo vehemently. "You! But I've beaten you, Terak, though you escaped me once. I've beaten the whole of this craven, planet-bound horde! I signaled Aldur last night, as soon as I knew you were safely jailed and could not raise an army against mine!"

He barely uttered the last few words, and then his head slumped forward. The last of his life leaked out with the stream of blood.

Terak glanced up to find that the Praestans had also heard the last sentence. Shocked, worried, the officers who had trusted Janlo were demanding orders, and the men below the balcony were humming like swarming bees.

"How long does it take to get from deep in the Big Dark to the Marches of Klareth?" the Praestans demanded, and Terak shook his head.

"Depends whether the fleet has already moved in. But although Aldur may have mounted the invasion at once and already be on the move, I, in the fastest ship I could

steal, and traveling on emergency extreme, which he will *not* be, took eleven days."

"Eleven days! It takes a fast patrol craft nine to get from here to Fillenkep! Let alone a heavy-laden trooper." The Praestans bit his lip. "Where is the invasion due to strike first?"

"Unless Janlo and Aldur altered the plans when I left, first at Fillenkep and then at various important islands all over the northern hemisphere. They relied on the time news takes to travel south, and the traitors planted among Janlo's army, to prevent the defenses from interfering until they were well established."

"Then our first task is to weed out the traitors," said the Praestans. "The second—to move north like wildfire!"

IT WAS NOT until, three days later aboard one of the fastest patrol vessels in the Klarethly fleet, they tore past an island whose wooded head was crowned with flame and smoke, that Terak realized how exactly apt the comparison was. There must have been many among the fleet who looked on that island as home, who felt sorrow at seeing wildfire strip it to barrenness, but there was danger

of a worse kind of fire laying waste the whole of Klareth.

Red-eyed, the Praestans sat with his officers on the deck of the patrol vessel listening to Terak expound what he remembered of the pirates' plan. Again and again, an officer would exclaim, "But you can't reduce"—such an island—"in *that* space of time!" only to find Terak wearily recounting just how he, Janlo and Aldur had proved you *could* do so.

"But this bears the signs of master strategy!" the Praestans said at one point, and Terak gave him a sour grin.

"It took three of us to work it out! The real test is whether one of us—me!—can spot the weak points in it within the next few days."

But he did, and as he commanded and deployed and stationed the Klarethly forces, the Praestans eyed him thoughtfully.

The strain was telling on the old man, but he insisted that the welfare of his people came before his own. To know that their ruler was planning with the generals, he declared, was worth another regiment or flotilla to the defenders. Yet his girl slave had to attend him more frequently, and the healing steam treatment was no longer a subterfuge, but a dire necessity.

His weariness and illness, though, seemed not to hinder his judgment or the shrewdness of his suggestions. Many a time Terak was grateful for his intimate knowledge of Klarethly affairs.

"The defense plan must depend on the landing actually taking place," Terak hammered home again and again in his planning conferences. "If the pirates suspect anything, they will attack before they actually land, and we have no way of dealing with space-borne weapons. An invasion we can counter—but not bombardment."

"How about the naval patrols?" or "How about the rebel army?" someone would snap, and Terak would wipe his brow and repeat with dogged insistence that the patrols must *not* be alerted, but go about their ordinary routine, and the rebels must be contained with a minimum force under instructions to behave as much as possible like the entire Klarethly army and navy.

Conscious of the way time was slipping by, Terak begrudged even the short time their racing craft had to lie to so that the officers from the other vessels who had come aboard for the conference could return. On the fourth

day the Praestans found him impatiently pacing the deck and murmuring against just such a delay as he watched the other ships bump up against their own in succession and take back their passengers.

"What worries you, Terak?" Farigol inquired, and broke into a cough on the last word.

"Time!" said Terak bitterly. "Four days gone of our precious eleven, and even when we reach Fillenkep we still have to alert the population and dispose our forces."

"It will be done," said Farigol peaceably. There was a pause; then, "Terak, why are you so eager to save my world from your kinfolk's ravages?"

Terak shrugged. "I suppose—because this is a better way to live—"

Farigol's eyes fixed him. "You have noticed, perhaps, that our names here are full of sounds which are short, and abrupt. Where did your ancestors come from, Terak—do you know?"

Terak shook his head. "Few people yonder in the Big Dark take much account of ancestry."

"Terak," said the Praestans musingly. "Terak—Klareth. Has it not occurred to you that you may have found

your true kinfolk here?"

Terak turned the idea over in his mind, wondering, and the other signaled his ever-present girl attendant and made his way below, throwing a cheery good night over his shoulder and beginning to cough again as he went.

INTEREST in Farigol's suggestion mingled in Terak's mind with thoughts of the rapid failing of the Praestans's health. He hoped that the strain of the next few days would not prove too much for the old man.

Nine days from Aldur's fatal signal! And the fleet hove in sight of the island of Fillenkep. By now the plan was smooth, concerted. It needed only putting into action.

First the officers went ashore with the message. Criers raced through the streets, commanding the people to attend a public meeting forthwith, and they came, alarmed, to hear the terrifying news.

"As you love Klareth!" they were told, "wait until the pirates are confident. Act as you would if you were afraid of being enslaved. But *don't* be afraid, for we are only lying in wait until the right moment comes."

The people listened in grim silence, and then dispersed to their homes, to talk quietly, watch, and await the invasion.

Meantime, Terak busied himself with the concealment of the better part of Klareth's forces among the wooded fringes of the islands. Their last two days passed in a frantic testing of their organization; it worked without a hitch.

After that, there was nothing they dared do but wait. The stragglers, the slow freighters who had not made it to the latitude of Fillenkep by the eleventh day, were perforce held back and likewise driven into concealment. It irked Terak almost beyond bearing that still another full day passed without event.

"If I'd known!" he fretted as he and Kareth walked together on the deck of the command ship, overhung by vast, wide-leaved trees which securely hid them from above. "We could have moved up six thousand more men and forty-five more ships!"

"But we didn't dare!" Kareth reminded him. "There must be no chance of the pirates realizing their plans are forestalled."

"No, I guess not," said Terak wearily, acknowledging the force of his own argu-

ment, and dashed up onto the stern castle to thrust aside the overhanging branches and stare yet again into the enigmatic sky.

CHAPTER VIII

AND THEN, at last, it came.

Terak had been out on occasional slave raids, though nowadays the pirates could seldom organize enough effort to launch one. He had sometimes wondered what it was like to stand helpless and see the sleek giants descending on your homeland, arrowlike, prepared to trade as many as two of their crew for every ten of your friends they stole away as slaves: bloody, violent fighters, brilliant, persistent, well-nigh invincible.

But this was more than a slave raid, more than a brief occupation, a few hours under an iron heel while suitable slave material was kidnapped and dragged aboard ship. Instead of the usual three or four ships, there were ninety-odd, and this was only the first wave.

He wondered where Aldur was.

The ships dropped swiftly; their hulls were still glowing red from friction when they hit land. They went down anywhere, on beaches, in open

spaces in the towns, and often among the woods, which they set blazing from the heat of their hulls.

But even trees on fire did not hinder the outgush of men from the locks. Almost before the vessels had settled, it seemed, they were swarming forth, descending on the "unsuspecting" towns and villages.

Reassured already by the obvious lack of preparation by the patrols out in space, they gave no more than a passing thought to the defenses. As far as they could tell, Klar-eth's fleet and its army were half the world away, far beyond hope of interfering until the invasion was well established—and torn apart by the pretended slaves who had been planted earlier, into the bargain.

The populace reacted magnificently. Terak had arranged that a few officers should be placed at strategic points, to direct half-hearted "counter-attacks" carefully designed to dissolve in confusion with a minimum loss of life. Except for these isolated conflicts, the inhabitants ran around like a disturbed nest of ants, strikingly, but to no purpose.

By nightfall the pirates had been on Klareth ten hours; they were in apparent control

of every major island in the northern hemisphere from Fillenken on down.

Almost biting their nails with anxiety, Terak, Kareth and the Praestans with his staff waited aboard the command ship. At intervals couriers had slipped away to apprise them of the situation, but at sunset it was long since a message had reached them. All the news they had was the negative knowledge that the pirates had not been forced into a major battle anywhere, for that would instantly have been reported to them.

But with night fully on them, they saw a trail in the ocean—a wake of phosphorescence which might have been left by the fin of a tor-fish. No tor-fish, however, would have ventured so close to shore, and the lookout identified it well before details could be distinguished.

Followed by the hobbling Praestans, Terak hastened down to the stern and was among those who lent willing hands to hoist the man aboard. It was one of Farigol's personal slaves, who had been sent into Fillenken as a spy.

He gave his master a flashing grin as he wiped water off his face and thrust back his soaking wet forelock. Terak pressed him urgently for

information on their work.

"Gone perfectly, Terak!" said the slave with enthusiasm. "Those pirates seem determined to find out everything a planet-bound life has to offer in their first night here." His face darkened. "They tend to take what they want when they want it, and I've seen some nasty sights—"

Terak remembered that Aldur had done just that, and his stomach seemed to fill with the quintessence of anticipation. "What of Aldur?" he questioned fiercely.

"There was something afoot around the government building early this evening," the slave stated. "A further ship came down to join the first wave. Someone of importance went from it to the government building, like I say. Could well have been Aldur, don't you guess?"

Terak nodded grimly. "It would fit well with Aldur's ambitious ways to sleep in the capitol of his new-conquered world," he answered. "Think you the time is ripe?"

"As a Sirenian plum," said the courier with relish, and the entire group about him tensed. Terak half turned to address the man with the signal lamp at the stern, and then relaxed, sighing.

"No, not even yet," he de-

cided. "How long would you say the people will be patient?" he demanded of the courier.

The man shrugged. "Past midnight—perhaps. But already those who knew who I was were asking when the moment to strike would come, before I left. Once an incautious word reaches the ears of an invader—"

"One hour more," said Terak, drawing a deep breath. "One hour and an eternity."

And, though it cost him dear to try and remain calm, not until that whole hour had slipped into the past did he look up at the man on the stern castle with the signal lamp and raise his right hand.

INSTANTLY the signaler unshielded the flame of the lamp; the next ship astern repeated the sign and relayed it, and so on around the island. The last in line flashed it across the few short miles of ocean to the neighboring islands. Inside thirty minutes, they knew from tests, that signal would reach every island held by the invader, every island where the defenders waited their chance to hit back.

Men leapt to power the reactor of the command ship;

the helmsman used the very first kick to swing her bows and begin the short journey to the beach where they would land. Now the whole fleet of Klareth was on the move, and lightless and almost soundless they stole over the sea.

The first target, of course, was the pirate fleet. Up from the shore moved the silent men, creeping along paths they had known since childhood; the lax sentries posted by the invaders had no time to do more than gurgles before they were strangled at their posts.

Soon, each ship from the Big Dark was ringed by a circle of invisible foes, attending the panicky rout which they knew would bring the pirates running to a massacre in the darkness. The often haphazard choice of landing places they had made suited the Klarethly purpose to perfection.

Runners came back from each detachment of the landing party as soon as the encirclement of the spaceships on Fillenkep was complete. Terak heard the news with grim satisfaction. The ship which had landed last and presumably had brought Aldur was plainly visible from most parts of the island, including the government building. If

Aldur were to look out at it, he would not guess that there was anything to hinder him from returning to it if and when he wished.

Terak chuckled mirthlessly at the thought. "We can move in, then," he said softly, and turned to the Praestans who waited on deck behind him. "I hope in an hour or two to give you back your planet intact, Ser Farigol," he declared. "And I hope to gain—my planet in the doing of it."

"You may be more right than you think," said the old man cryptically. "Good luck go with you, Terak!" He turned aside and leaned on his girl slave for support; the sound of his breathing was almost raucous in the silence.

"Good luck, Terak!" said Kareth, stepping forward. "I wish I could be there beside you, fighting for my world!"

"You will be, in spirit," said Terak steadily, and took her in his arms for one brief moment before he signaled his men onwards with a sweep of his arm, and clambered lightly over the side of the vessel into the shallow water.

Ahead of the army went stealthy messengers, who knocked at doors and whispered to those who answered, "Now!" The word almost at once outstripped the messen-

gers, and the city closed on its invaders like the clawed talon of a bird of prey, like a hand crushing a ripe fruit, like an executioner's noose on the neck of a condemned man.

Men who had been lying hidden for two days rose, stretched their cramped limbs, emerged with weapons from their secret places and went hunting. In the drinking shops, the bartenders chuckled as they added drops of poison to the latest orders; in the eating-houses, waiters picked up the carving knives and carved throats instead of the waiting roast katalab meat; in the streets, drunken pirates walked around corners into welcome of steel.

Before Aldur could learn what was happening, the back of the invasion was broken.

The ladies of easy virtue crept from their beds without pity and regretted only that the blood of their victims would stain the bedding before they put away their knives. Householders on whom pirates had been forcibly billeted stole into the street with their families and seized the night's issue of torches from the sconces on the wall and set them to the timber. There was no hesitation, for there were enemies inside.

Some of the pirates were nearly lucky. They were the ones who were sober or wary enough to guess what was happening, overcame their attackers, and rushed into the roads crying a warning to their fellows. But by that time Terak's men were already within the city, and though they banded together and fought desperately, soon they were put to flight.

Striking down the enemy one after another with the blood of Klarethly victims still wet on their sword-blades, Terak knew it was worth all he had been through to see their faces as they recognized him and died trying to utter his name.

To see Aldur do the same . . . !

"Where's Aldur?" he demanded of them one by one, and received sobbed assertions that they did not know. He believed them; a man in fear of a bloody and imminent death can seldom lie convincingly.

"Ask them where Aldur is!" he yelled, turning to his men, and the order was passed from mouth to mouth, each man flinging the question as he brought up his blade to the throat of a pirate.

"In—in the big building at the center of the town," final-

ly choked one of those of whom Terak sought the knowledge. "Spare me! Have mercy!"

"Your life I will spare," said Terak thickly. "For your kind assistance! But I will not have you running to warn your fellows when we are gone by. *Thus I spare you!*"

His sword flashed, and the man screamed and fell groveling with his right wrist slashed. "Hold it tight!" Terak advised him. "That way you will not bleed to death."

He turned and called his men to him. "Aldur is in the government building!" he informed them. "Get there as quickly and as silently as you know how."

He himself began to eat up the distance at a run.

AMAZINGLY, the huge bulk of the building was still in comparative quiet. Apparently no one had passed the Klarethly soldiers in the nearby streets to warn Aldur and his staff within.

The building, though large, was not fortified, but men who were acquainted with its interior told him that it would be hard to take.

"Set fire to it!" suggested one of Terak's soldiers, panting and near berserk.

"No!" snapped one of his companions. "I have it from a pirate whose throat I cut a moment gone that there are many Klarethly prisoners there, and many women Aldur had taken in for the amusement of his officers."

Terak's head swam for an instant; he knew what that term *amusement* implied.

Celly! Oh, Celly, my dead beloved!

He forced the memory into the back of his mind, and snapped swift orders. His men split up to seek a vulnerable entrance to the building, and one came back in a moment with report of an unguarded doorway.

"Aldur!" murmured Terak under his breath as he approached the entrance. "Make the most of your little triumph! You have not long now. . . ."

He threw himself bodily at the door; his left shoulder felt pain for a moment, and then he was sprawling on the floor of a passage beyond, his hand still grasping the jamb which he had seized as he fell, and which had come clean away with the violence of his charge.

He leapt to his feet and hastened down the passage, the sound of footsteps behind him enough to let him know he

was being followed. But at the moment he felt he could make his way to Aldur single-handed, against the entire might of the pirates here in the government building.

A startled man caught sight of him in the dim glow of a resinous torch; before he could cry out, Terak was on him, sword poised.

"One yell, and you're dead," he whispered. "Where is Aldur?"

The man had a pasty yellow face; it turned near white as he recognized Terak, and his mouth went so slack that drool spilled over his chin. "In—in an apartment which belonged to the Praestans," he gulped, and Terak corrected him with a sardonic smile.

"Which still *belongs* to the Praestans!" he said. "I go to restore it to its owner. *Which* way?"

The man gestured, too overcome to speak; Terak knocked him unconscious and raced in the indicated direction. His men followed, but he outdistanced them, and only a handful were behind him when he stormed into the Praestantial apartments. The remainder were flinging open doors and surprising Aldur's officers asleep, drinking, wenching, making plans to exploit their imagined victory. . . .

Astonished guards within the apartment leapt to their feet. Terak paid them exactly no attention, and as they recovered and started to go after him, the Klarethly soldiers who were following him also took them from behind. They died with the gurgle of blood in their mouths.

And — yes! Terak had judged all right: to sleep in the Praestantial bed was much to Aldur's taste. Here, now, at last, he was face to face with his enemy, and the leader of the invaders was starting awake alongside the woman of his taste at the moment, who cowered frightened between the covers.

Face like thunder, Terak stood over the bed and made his sword whistle in the air. He spat contemptuously at Aldur's companion, thinking of the vast gulf between this complacent chit and Celly, who was dead. The picture of Aldur holding Celly in his embrace made him coldly, completely angry.

"Terak!" said Aldur, and his voice was pleading, as though he prayed to some unknown deity that this should be a dream.

"That same. You took away from me what I most loved and most desired, and made me look on it as you left it—

ruined. You love nothing and no one so much as naked power. Therefore I have taken that from you, and you too shall look on the ruins of what you have loved." He stepped back. "Go to yonder window, from which you can see your spaceship."

Aldur made no move to obey, and with one furious motion Terak stripped away the covers and seized his arm. "If you won't go, I will take you," he said between clenched teeth, and with more strength than he knew he had remaining in his body he dragged Aldur forcibly across the floor.

Beyond the window, beyond the city, was the ship which had brought the pirate lord out of the Big Dark. It was ringed with liquid fire, and very faintly on the air came the screams of men dying by the light of the flames.

Aldur went quite limp in Terak's grasp at the sight.

"Now you have seen, as I had to see," Terak said savagely. "Now I have a debt to settle, and so have you." He rounded on the soldiers who had followed him into the bedroom. "Give this—undead carrion—a sword!"

They obeyed; three hilts were at once offered. But Al-

dur grasped none of them. Instead, he put his hands giddily to his head, sagged slowly at the knees, and slumped to the floor.

Terak's disappointment lasted only a moment. He had thought to take personal revenge, but vengeance had long ago ceased to be the mainspring of his actions on Klar-eth, and in that moment he likewise ceased to desire it. He sheathed his bloody sword with none of Aldur's gore on it, and grew conscious of an infinite weariness.

He stood gazing at Aldur's prostrate form for perhaps minutes on end, until a sudden familiar voice made him start alert again. *Kareth's* voice!

She was shouting, "Terak! Is Terak here? Have you seen Terak?" And suddenly she appeared in the doorway.

"Kareth! You're mad to come here now," Terak declared, starting forward. "You could have been killed in the streets."

The girl's manner had changed the instant she saw him. Slowly, she shook her fiery head. "Not now, Terak," she said. "Klareth is yours!"

And she bowed to him, deeply, ritually, so that her hair nearly swept his feet.

"What is the meaning of

this?" Terak demanded, bewildered.

She straightened. "Klareth is yours, Terak! I wanted to be the first of your subjects to do you honor. Farigol is dead. The strain was too much for him, and he passed away when the news was brought that we had won back Fillenkep. But with his dying breath, he named you for Praestans."

"How could he do that?" Terak's head whirled.

"When the vote is called among the islands, since there is no near member of the line to be chosen, the voice of the dead Praestans will ensure your right to succeed." She spoke clearly, somehow *hopefully*.

"Will you take Klareth,

Terak? Will you learn to rule what you have saved?"

The soldiers in the room, recovering from their amazement, had started to bow clumsily to the Praestans-elect. Ignoring them, Terak closed his eyes momentarily and heard Farigol's voice in memory—a voice he would never hear again.

"You may have found your true kinfolk here!"

And Terak knew it was so, and that this was the way it had to be.

"I will have Klareth," he said, opening his eyes again, "if I can have Kareth, too."

And for a moment it was as if the oceans of the planet were telling him yes, but it was the sea-green eyes of a girl.



RECALLED TO LIFE!

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THE WORLD OTALMI MADE

by HARRY HARRISON

*The only way to void
a Profession man's
contract was to kill
him—if you could!*

Illustrated by John Martinez



The World Otalmi Made

by Harry Harrison

CHAPTER I

FROM THE WINDOW of the shuttleship Brek Han-Hesit had a fine view of the port landing ramp. The mechanics, customs agents, company officials—all the varied group that is on hand when the passengers land from an interstellar ship. And the police agents, a squad of shock troops and a half-concealed gun unit as well. He made a fast estimate of the reception forces and reached the grim but inescapable conclusion that they were waiting for him. There was entirely too much force there to greet an ordinary flight. And he was the only possible one on the ship that might deserve that kind of unwelcome attention.

With a specialist of the Profession, to think is to act. Sometimes the two are so close together that they seem to occur at the same instant. Even as Brek estimated the strength of the welcoming committee, he was out of his seat and walking towards the front of the ship. Other passengers were milling about,

dragging out luggage and coats. Brek slipped through the crowd with the easy habit of a shadow. As he reached the door to the pilot's compartment, his right hand flicked out with a diamond-hard tool that slipped into the door jamb. A quick twist fractured the lock and the door opened easily to his left hand. Then he was through and the door was closed behind him.

The shuttleship from the satellite station had only a single pilot. As the man turned, his mouth half-open with a question, Brek's hand moved. The stiff fingers punched deep into the pilot's neck. The man gasped and slipped unconscious to the floor. A fraction harder and he would have been dead.

With quick, skilled motions, Brek stripped the pilot's uniform off and pulled it on over his own tight garments. The fit was snug, but the difference was hardly noticeable to a casual glance. Rolling the pilot out of line of sight, he opened the door.

In the cabin the last passengers were just leaving. Push-

ing the stolen flight cap to a jaunty angle, Brek strolled down the exit ramp and turned towards the Operations Room. No one tried to stop him and each step took him farther from the radiation rifles of the guards.

"You there—pilot—stop!"

Brek was almost to the barrier fence when the voice called out. He turned to see a guard, rifle held at port, come lumbering up.

"We have to check them all," the guard said. Then a dawning knowledge glowed in his eye. "You're not the pilot—you're the one!"

Brek Han-Hesit waited, unmoving. He hoped there was a way to avoid the unavoidable. But the guard had his orders. He skidded to a stop, raised his gun and depressed the trigger. At the very last instant before the wave of living flame washed out, Brek's hand moved. His wrist knife slid into his palm—then snapped forward to bury its sharp length in the guard's throat.

Before the body hit the ground, Brek was through the gate and mixing with the uniformed crowd in Operations. The alarm would go off at any moment and he had to be out of the building by that time. He walked a little faster, risking being noticed but

willing to take the chance.

As he stepped through the exit the alarm bells crashed hysterically and the door snapped shut not a foot behind him. The close escape didn't shake his calm manner in the slightest. It is an unspoken motto in the Profession that a miss is as good as a parsec.

The first cab in the rank had its motor running; the driver jumped when the alarm blasted. Brek climbed into the cab and before the driver could voice his question he said:

"Another smuggler caught. Must have tried to run away from the guards."

It was answer enough and the cabbie didn't think to question a pilot. He pulled out into the traffic as Brek gave his directions.

That was the first cab. Brek left it less than a mile from the port and took another. By easy stages he blurred his trail and vanished among the fifteen million inhabitants of Angvis, capital city of Dubhe IV.

ANTHUR DAAS was a cautious man, and a careful one as well. He had not reached his present high station in life by accident. As head of Utility Powerpaks he headed the big-

gest trust on the planet—and he intended to keep it that way. Only Daas had the keys to the inner offices. All the executives waited in the reception room until he arrived in the morning. As his giant form heaved through the door they stood respectfully. He returned a curt nod and unlocked the door.

Inside, as the others went their own ways, Anthur Daas lumbered straight ahead. His five secretaries followed. His keys snapped open four more doors until he spun the combination lock on his private office. The secretaries had peeled off at their own desks and he entered the office alone.

Behind his oversize desk was the chair built for his two-meter, 150-kilo frame. Brek Han-Hesit was almost lost in the vast reaches of hand-rubbed leather.

"Come in, Daas," he said, "and close the door behind you."

Anthur Daas' hand streaked for his gun but stopped halfway. His mind had moved faster and he knew the sheer insanity of drawing a gun on the man in the chair.

"You must be the one we sent for," Daas said. "There isn't a man in this system that could get into this office with-

out setting off an alarm. Though, I must say, I don't think much of your breaking in like this."

Brek waved the big man to his own chair and slid into another one across the room.

"I would have preferred a daytime visit myself—it took me almost two hours to find a way into this office—but it wasn't mine to make a choice." He was silent a second, then hurled the question at Anthur Daas. "How many people knew I was coming—and which one of them told the police?"

"The police!" Daas breathed. "They *can't* know!"

"But they do. I'm afraid we can't escape that fact. They were waiting for my ship when it sat down, they had a description of me—and they very nearly killed me. Now I would like a complete description of what is going on on this planet and what I was hired for. I'll need that for an evaluation of the situation, so I can get on with the job."

"No," Daas said, his face pale under his coat of tan. "You can't go on—the whole thing is off. I'm sorry you ever came to this office."

Brek looked at the man's naked cowardice. When he answered there was touch of steel in his voice.

"You can't back out. The sooner you realize that the better it will be for you. When you signed a contract with the Profession you committed yourself just as much as we did. Our contracts are never broken; they are always completed. Neither party can withdraw until the assignment is done."

"Nonsense," Daas exploded. "I make and break contracts every day. And this one is broken."

Daas never saw the other man move. One moment Brek was in his chair—then Daas felt a sharp pain. It took him a second to realize that his head was bent back at a painful angle and a knife point was pressing against his eyeball. It hurt. The hand twisted in his hair pulled his head even farther back and he looked up into Brek's emotionless face.

"This contract is not the kind that can be broken," Brek said. "The contracts you deal with each day are worthless things, of no more lasting importance than the paper they are printed on. A Profession contract is different. It is a contract of *honor*. Honor cannot be destroyed, even if a man is killed. While both parties are alive the contract stands. If you cancel the con-

tract you cancel your life. Please decide quickly. My knife will go into your brain and you will die instantly."

The knife point was a spot of hot pain on Anthur Daas' eyeball—an insistent pressure that pushed the only possible answer out of his mouth.

"The contract still stands. Now—take that knife away!"

Brek was back in his chair, the knife vanished in its unseen sheath. Daas rubbed his sore neck and tried to regain his lost composure.

"You should have known more about the Profession," Brek said dryly. "Then you could have avoided all this discomfort."

"I know enough about them," the big man growled, "Hired thugs and killers who will do anything for a credit. Highly paid and I suppose more skilled than most—but still thugs."

"That's where you are wrong," Brek said. "Many people have made that mistake and very few have lived to tell about it. Our planet is not called Hideout by any accident. Centuries ago it was just that—a hideout. Swinging around a dim sun behind the Coalsack Nebula it made a perfect base for all of the ship-wreckers and cut-throats of the space lanes. Any num-

ber of gangs hid out there and of necessity had to have a working agreement with each other. You've heard of *thieves' honor*. The Profession grew out of that. Because of the very nature of these gangs they had to have a third party who could negotiate agreements and take care of trade. That is how the Profession began. A group that would undertake any task, at an agreed price, and never stop until the job was done.

"Hideout is a civilized planet now, though our social order is one of the most unusual in the known universe. The background of our order is the Profession. Most of our work is confined to our own planet, though there are a few highly skilled men, myself included, who work elsewhere. Our services are available at a high price and our work is guaranteed.

"In addition to bringing needed currency to our planet, many of us look upon this work as a mission. Bringing what we consider a superior form of morality to other worlds."

Daas suppressed a shudder at the thought and tried to see if the lean killer was joking. There was no way to tell.

"So you see," Brek concluded, "this contract will be

finished whether you still have the stomach for it or not. Tell me the details."

BEFORE he answered Daas took a calmer, washed down with a glass of brandy. He didn't offer Brek any.

"I suppose there is no other way," Daas finally said. "We will have to go through with it. You will have to find out how Otalmi does it, what power he wields—"

"Hold it up," Brek interrupted. "I want the whole story, from the beginning. Who is Otalmi?"

"Former chief of the secret police," Daas said. "He had the post for at least ten years and no one noticed him. Then things began to happen. Friends of his were appointed, men in high places began to favor him. Eight months ago there was a palace revolution and when the dust settled he was top man. One of the stronger counties tried to attack and was cut to pieces. Spies in high places was the report I received; they were betrayed from within. That seems to be the pattern of how he operates.

"Otalmi is one of the most unattractive people I have ever met. He has a brain, undoubtedly, but he could only

have risen to power in the secret police. To know him is to hate him. Yet any number of people seem to have gone over to his side. Men you could be sure of. We suspected android substitution or hypnotic control. We were wrong. A number of prisoners were examined literally cell by cell and nothing was found. They *liked* the man and wanted to work for him. Their minds were untampered with.

"This is why we signed the contract with the Profession. Two other men and myself put up the money. We are next and we know it—unless something is done."

Brek had risen and was pacing soundlessly. He stopped and stared out of the window at the sprawling city of Angvis, far below.

"These other two men," he said. "Were they the only ones who knew I was coming?"

"Yes," Daas answered. "Just the three of us knew of the existence of the contract. But these men are reliable. Neither would talk unless—"

"Exactly," Brek said. "Unless they have changed sides like so many others are doing. I suggest the first thing we do is get them here and weed out the traitor."

Trajn-Sekci came in first. When he opened the door the first thing he saw was Brek sitting in a well-lit chair. What he didn't see was the adding-machine brain behind the Profession man's eyes. Every motion Trajn-Sekci made was observed; every gesture seen and filed. Any motion out of the ordinary would have registered at once.

The industrialist looked at the seated man for a moment, then his eyes flicked to Anthur Daas seated at his desk. "Why did you call me here?"

Daas delivered his coached line.

"The Profession sent this man. He arrived last night."

Trajn-Sekci registered relief in eight different ways. His body relaxed; his hands lost their strained positions. Brek saw all these things and knew the man's thoughts before he could speak.

The secretary announced that Sire Primol was on his way in. The third man with the secret. An instant behind her words the door opened and Primol came in.

He was the man. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Brek. He kept walking. Casually he reached for his pocket, reaching for something unimportant. Brek waited until the other's gun was out before he

drew and fired, smashing the other man's hand.

Before examining the injured man Brek carefully closed the door.

"Make him talk," Daas said. "Make him tell why he switched sides. Now we'll find out something!"

One look at the strained features was all Brek needed. He shook his head. "We'll never get anything out of him. He's dead. Poison, from the look of it. Must have carried it in a tooth capsule to have it work so fast."

Trajn-Sekci had dropped into a chair and was ordering a drink from the bar in a hoarse voice. Daas doubled the order. Brek planned the next step in his mind.

"Do you have a good cosmetic surgeon?" he asked.

Anthur Daas nodded. "Right in this building. One of the best. I'll call down and clear out the surgery so you won't be recognized. There are probably other spies in the organization. Anything is possible if they could get to Primol."

A private elevator took Brek to the hospital floor. Daas guided him and their footsteps echoed hollowly the length of the corridor. The sign on the door said "Dr. Adlan Grif." They went in.

Dr. Grif was young, very attractive and female. For a short instant Brek considered this; beauty and youth didn't seem to fit the requirements of the job. The thought was gone almost as fast as it began. He had seen far stranger things while filling other contracts.

"Wait for me to contact you," he told Daas. "I'll do that as soon as I have news of any importance. Meanwhile take whatever steps you can to guard against further spies."

Dr. Grif waited until Daas had gone before she spoke.

"You're the man the police are looking for," she said.

"The same," Brek told her with a smile. "And you're the one who is going to fix it so they don't recognize me. You can lower my cheekbones, make them a bit narrower at the same time. Then my jaw can be widened and—"

"Just a minute Mr. Nameless-criminal," she snapped. "I'm the only doctor here and I will decide how the changes are to be made. Now come inside."

When she stood up Brek openly admired the fullness of her hips under the white gown, the youthful narrowness of her waist and high bosom. She flushed a little un-

der his concentrated attention. When she walked past him Brek stopped her with an open hand. Then leaned forward until their faces almost touched.

"I know you're the doctor, Adlan," he said. "But I'm the man with the face. My cheekbones are metal, as is the point of my jaw. Plastic inserts form the shape of my nose and ears. I know where these things are and how they can be changed easily—as they have been in the past. Don't you think I can help?"

His closeness and the intensity of his voice broke through her reserve. The red flush on her face made her even more attractive, he thought.

"You will—please call me Dr. Grif," was all she could say.

"Yes, doctor," he answered with a smile, and followed her into the surgery.

Using only the surgical machines and operating under a local anesthetic, she started the procedure. Brek watched her work through mirrors and was more than pleased. She had a light, sure touch and worked with skill. When she had finished he had a new face.

As she put the regeneration pads in place on his face he

thanked her. "A very good job, Dr. Adlan Grif. Just about the best I have ever seen."

"Of course," she said dryly. Operating had restored her confidence and there was a touch of humor in her voice. When she left her walk was more feminine than professional.

Under the gentle stimulus of the pads Brek drifted off to sleep. His last thoughts were pleasant. There were aspects of this job that were better than he had expected.

At midnight he woke up and dressed in the dark, then left the building—unnoticed and unrecognized.

CHAPTER II

THE BUREAU of Internal Security building was in a warehouse neighborhood, an island of light in a sea of black buildings. The B.I.S. The Secret Police. The headquarters of Otalmi's revolt that had swept the reins of government into his hands. The secret, whatever it was, lay in that building.

From a darkened doorway Brek watched the dark cars coming and going and the black-uniformed men that poured in and out. There was a wry smile on his face, in-

visible in the darkness. He had tackled tough ones in the past—but this was just asking for it.

Most people thought that men of the Profession were without emotions or human feelings. This was a mistake for which they often paid heavily. Training accounted for his lightning reflexes and calm manner. He used his skill so effectively because he *did* know how other people thought and felt. His own emotions were there, only carefully controlled by years of practice. Fear was there—he let a little of it well up for an instant. *Good for the adrenals*, he thought, and smiled again.

An hour later he saw the opportunity he was waiting for. A single B.I.S. man—on foot. After the man had passed, Brek stepped out and followed him. When they turned the corner a sudden silent blow dropped the policeman.

Leaving the policeman trussed and gagged in a locked warehouse, Brek walked towards the brightness of the B.I.S. building. *Another uniform*, he thought to himself. *That makes the second one stolen in one day. Like most single-power cultures these people love their uniforms. There is an authority to a uni-*

form that is much greater than the man that wears it.

Arms swinging slightly, back straight, he strode up the stairs and into the police building. At first the scene was confused, a large hall filled with uniformed men. Then his mind began ticking off sections of it. *Receiving desk . . . communications center . . . reports . . . guard post . . .*

Near the communications post he spotted what he had been looking for, a place where he could sit quietly without being disturbed. Three rows of benches near the outgoing desk held about thirty B.I.S. men. Some were reading or talking, a few obviously asleep. Armed messengers—and they were about to get a recruit. Circling the room so he could approach the benches from the rear, Brek strolled up and slid into a seat.

There was a pouch attached to the stolen uniform. He opened it and showed a great interest in the routine forms it contained. At the same time he watched the men around him, alert for any interest on their part. Only one man looked towards Brek, his eyes drawn by the motion. He looked away after scarcely half a glance. Brek watched



them all carefully until he was certain they showed no interest. Only then he turned his attention back to the room itself.

Very quickly he noticed that this reception room was sealed off from the rest of the building. There were entrances on all sides but each one had human and electronic guards. After a close examination of each one he settled on what was obviously the prison entrance as the best bet. Guards were going in and out fairly often, as well as batches of prisoners. The prison guards were dressed exactly like himself.

When the next group of stumbling, frightened civilians came through the front entrance, he walked casually to meet them. There was a single guard at the front, another at the end of the column. Brek walked parallel to the prisoners until they shielded him from the rear guard. When they came to the prison door he moved closer and became the third guard.

It was just that easy. No one questioned him, the prisoners least of all. When they passed through the door the guard stationed there nodded, and Brek nodded back. Then they were all through, the door clanged shut behind

them. A metal-lined corridor stretched far ahead. There was a second door at the far end.

When the first guard shouted, the door swung open. As the guard went through he touched a red plate set in the wall next to the door. Brek pushed the prisoners through ahead of him and looked at the plate suspiciously. There was no mark or indication of its use. He decided to ignore it. Walking firmly he passed through the door.

The guard stationed inside stopped him. "Hey, corporal," he said, "you forgot the thumb plate." He waved towards it.

Brek had two choices. Either he could knock out the guard and take it from there—or press the plate. Whatever happened after he touched the plate could be no worse than the results of slugging the guard. And it might do nothing. He decided to play it that way.

This observation, consideration and judgment took place in the time necessary for him to turn towards the plate.

"Sorry," he said to the guard. "Guess I forgot."

He pressed his thumb to the plate and the alarm sirens blasted through every inch of the giant building.

THE GUARD was alert, his gun up and his finger on the trigger. Only he wasn't expecting anything to happen—Brek was. That microsecond of reflex made all the difference. They fired almost together, but the guard's shot burned harmlessly into the ceiling because he was dead as he pulled the trigger. Behind Brek the door closed and locked automatically.

They have my fingerprints, he thought, probably taken from the shuttle. And they must have been expecting me for the alarm to go off that fast. Now how do I get out of here?

Even as he considered this he was diving to one side, rolling as he fell. A blast of flame tore through the spot where he had been. His return shot killed the guard who had fired it. Flat against the floor, Brek searched the room for further resistance.

He was at one end of a corridor-like room with metal doors opening off it. They were all closed and undoubtedly locked. At least a dozen prisoners had entered the room before the door was closed. Two of them lay on the floor, injured by the shooting. Their moans were lost in the banshee howl of the alarm.

It was a tight corner. In spite of his training Brek could feel his forehead film with sweat. His palm was slippery on the gun butt; he wiped it carefully on his uniform as he forced his body back under control. There was a possible way out of any situation; he just had to find it.

Flat against his right thigh was a thin case of tiny grenades. He pulled the case out just as his eyes caught a flicker of motion high on one wall. A slot flipped open and a gun barrel poked through. Before the gunner could aim and fire Brek had flipped one of the pea-sized grenades at the wall. It exploded with a flat thud and a dense cloud of smoke surged out. The gun hammered through the blinding smoke but the shots were wild.

A second grenade at the opposite end of the room caused a complete blackout. Concealed by the smoke, Brek crawled to the far wall and inched along until his fingers touched one of the locked doors. Standing flat against the door he tapped it lightly until he found the spot over the lock mechanism. Another grenade dropped into his hand from the case. It had a plastic base that adhered to the metal door. As his fingernail tripped

the 1.5-second fuze, he flung himself backward.

The blast was tremendous, all out of proportion to the size of the bomb. Twisted and torn, the door flew open. Streamers of smoke surged down the hall. Two guards were running towards the open door, firing into the blackness. Brek dropped them both before he ran out of the room.

Chance had served him well. The door he had blasted opened into what appeared to be an office part of the police building. A few night lights sent long shadows through the otherwise empty halls. Brek ran, not caring how loud his footsteps sounded until he was free of the immediate area.

When the alarms cut off suddenly he knew the search was on. Sliding to a halt in the silence, he listened intently. Off to the right he heard the hammer of running feet. Silent as a trail of smoke, he slipped off in the opposite direction. Avoiding any doors that might signal his whereabouts, he made as good time as he could.

Rounding a corner, he almost bumped into a guard. The man must have heard his approach because he had his gun leveled and fired as soon

as Brek appeared. Only the fact that Brek attacked the man instantly saved his life. He was already diving forward when the shot seared a streak across his back. Then his body smashed into the guard, knocking the gun from his hand.

Although he was a skilled fighter, the guard was no match for the snakelike speed of the Profession man. His first blow was blocked easily, then a vise-like hand had his arm, twisting it up into the small of his back. When the man grunted with pain Brek stopped the pressure and held it firmly.

"No shouting or attempts to escape," Brek said. "Now take me to Otalmi's office by the quickest route."

As he said this he slipped his knife free and pressed it against the other's throat. A quick curved motion drew it across the man's neck. The blade barely broke through the skin, but it felt as if the entire neck was being cut through. The guard shuddered and tried to draw away.

"Don't—stop!" He choked the words out. "I'll take you there. Trust me—I!"

Brek trusted him not in the slightest, yet he had to have a guide. The man seemed frightened enough. He might

take him the right way instead of into a trap. With every man in the giant building searching for him, any action was better than waiting. They started down the hall.

A large panel slid open at the guard's touch. Behind it was a spiral lift, its moving ramp coming up from below and corkscrewing out of sight in the distance above. There was no one else in sight as they stepped on it. It revolved steadily, carrying them upward.

"What floor is Otalmi's office on?" Brek asked, noticing the numbers that moved slowly by them.

"Top floor," the man answered. "Number 85."

Brek chopped him in the base of the neck with the knife hilt and he dropped, unconscious. He was of no more use and could only impede the Profession man, looking for ways to trap or mislead him.

At the sixty-first level another policeman stepped onto the spiralway and Brek put his unconscious body next to the first man's. There were no other interruptions and at the top level he kicked open the door and dragged the two men out.

Dropping them, he ran down the hall, throwing a quick glance at each door as

he passed. One was much bigger than the others and decorated with burnished scrolls. He burst through it, crouched low and with gun ready.

It was Otalmi's office, but it was empty.

Brek dropped to the floor, rolling sideways, when someone laughed. The room was still empty but there was an image of a man in the viewing screen. An ugly, sharp-eyed man whose face was smeared with a malicious grin.

"At last," the televised image said, "our Profession man has arrived. When they told me you had escaped our first trap I left the city. I will come back as soon as you are safely dead—which should not be a long ti . . ."

A single shot destroyed the screen and the machine behind it. The man could only have been Otalmi. His conversation had been meant to delay Brek until the guards arrived. Shooting the screen had effectively ended the talk—as well as destroying the scanning tube. There was a single, slim chance left to escape if the guards didn't know where to look.

BACK IN THE HALL Brek forced himself to stand still while he orientated himself.

He had taken so many twists and turns after entering the building that he was no longer sure of his direction. One by one he retraced his turns until he knew in which direction he was facing. While his mind raced, the ascending whine of the elevators sounded in his ears. Panic was getting harder and harder to force down. Yet he had to go slow. There was only time enough for one decision. If he made the wrong one he was dead.

Running down the hall, he smashed through a door that *should* have been the right one. As he bolted it behind him he heard the elevator doors slide open. When he turned to face the room he had a moment of panic.

There were no windows. Then he spotted the door on the far wall and made for it. There was another room behind the first that had a large window. The pane was sealed into the frame and he cut it with quick blasts of his gun. Outside was a sheer drop to the roof of the next building, hundreds of meters below.

The Profession has a number of devices that its members use. The effectiveness of these gadgets of course depends on the man. Brek preferred to rely on his own re-

flexes, though there had been times when he was exceedingly grateful for their help. This was going to be one of those times.

With careful speed he un-snapped his web-maker and pulled it out. It was a flat, black device, little bigger than a man's hand. There was a loop-type grip at one end and a tiny orifice at the other. When he thumbed the trigger a tiny thread began emerging from the hole.

The first few yards out of the spinnet were dotted with a glue-like substance, very much like a spider's. Being careful not to touch it, he draped it along the window frame. Inside the web-maker was a vial of plastic fluid, forced out under pressure through a tiny spinnet. The fluid congealed instantly into an almost invisible strand of imposing strength.

Holding the little machine carefully away from his body, Brek straddled the window sill. Getting a firm grip with his left hand he lowered himself until he swung by the tips of his fingers. Then, with infinite care, he shifted his weight until it was hanging from his right arm. The tiny strand stretched but didn't break. When he let go with his left hand he swung out

over the black gulf, supported by a cable thinner than the thinnest thread.

Once he was moving steadily downward he moved the release up to the last notch. The pump buzzed loudly and the filament spun out at its top rate of close to a meter a second. Silently and steadily he dropped into the darkness.

It was a nightmare journey. His arm became numb and Brek changed hands carefully. Twice he had to pass lighted windows and had to swing himself out in a long arc—putting extra strain on the strand. And with each moment the tension grew. It was only a matter of time until they found the broken window. Then, if they spotted him and cut the line—!

There was no way he could alter the situation so he forced his mind from that thought train. The wall moved by steadily.

A sudden tug on the handle was the first sign that they had discovered his means of escape. He took grim pleasure in the thought that whoever had tried to shake him off was now nursing a badly cut hand. The strand was so thin that it was sharp as most knives.

Down below the darkness was as intense as ever. He couldn't tell if the roof of the

building was ten or a hundred feet beneath him. It was only a matter of seconds before someone realized that the quickest course would be to blast the strand.

Even as he thought it there was a silent flare of energy above him and the web no longer supported him. He threw the web-maker away as hard as he could so the falling strand wouldn't trap him. Body loose, knees limp, he prepared for the shock.

Subjective time betrayed him. The fall seemed to last forever. When the blow finally came it smashed him flat on the roof. The plastic panels bent and one broke under his sudden weight. It had been a bad drop—but not as bad as it could have been. His legs ached, though nothing seemed to be broken.

Painfully he pulled his foot free and limped towards the doorway. He wouldn't be even partially safe until he was well away from the B.I.S. building.

Guards were pouring out of the nearby entrance when he hit the street. One of the guard cars had just pulled up to the curb and the driver was getting out. Brek shot first and stepped over the smoking body. The armored body of the car absorbed the shots

fired after him. Then he was in the clear. Before pursuit could be organized he was well away from the area.

DITCHING the police car, he made his way by easy stages back to the Utility Powerpack Building.

Only when he was safe behind those massive walls did he let the fatigue hit him. It was almost overpowering. He had to lean against a wall for a minute until the shaking stopped. Then, stumbling and moving slowly, he made his way towards the surgery of Dr. Adlan Grif.

Adlan was behind her desk when he pushed the door open. She looked up and smiled.

"Glad to see you made it all right. Come on in." With her free hand she beckoned to him.

For a split second as her hand moved, the last three fingers closed against the palm and the thumb dipped. The centuries-old gesture that still meant "hand gun." Another person might not have seen her quick motion or might not have understood. Adlan counted on the hair-trigger reflexes of the Profession man and she was right.

Instead of walking straight

in, Brek slammed himself hard against the half-open door. It was the only concealment in the entire office. There was a thud and a hoarse cry from behind the door.

Before the concealed man could recover Brek was around the door.

Anthur Daas stood there, raising the gun the door had knocked down. Brek clipped him on the side of the head and looked on with gloomy satisfaction as the big man slid to the floor.

"What's this all about?" he asked Adlan.

"I have no idea," she said. "He came in here about an hour ago and planted himself behind the door. Said he would shoot me if I tried to warn you."

"Why did you bother to?" Brek asked. "He was your boss. Aren't you supposed to take his orders?"

"Aren't you glad I didn't take his orders?" she said with a grim chuckle. "I didn't obey him because he was *changed* somehow. I'm the one who did the examination of the other men that had gone over to Otalmi. His actions reminded me too much of them. After all, you are the only man who can help him if he is still fighting Otalmi's men."

She stood up and walked

over to look at the unconscious man. "Besides," she added, "I was probably being very selfish. Yesterday he was on one side—today he is on the other. Perhaps now I can find out how it was done."

When she wheeled to face Brek she was smiling and excited. She was all scientist—and all woman—at the same time. It was almost without volition that he stepped forward and put his arms around her. His fatigue and narrow escape were mixed up with her saving his life. When he bent to kiss her she tilted her head back and smiled. When his body pressed demandingly against her she responded only by wrapping her arms tightly around his back. Her hands pressed painfully against the wound on his shoulder but he didn't feel it in the wave of other emotion.

CHAPTER III

ONLY LATER did he remember to lock the door. She dressed his wound, then helped him drag Anthur Daas' immense form into the operating room.

While they scrubbed and put on sterile gowns, she explained her theory.

"These men who switch sides so suddenly and begin

to favor Otalmi—they can't be substitutes. In every physical way they are the same as before the switch. Only they have a different *attitude* towards a man they used to hate. This can only mean that the brain has been affected in some manner. All the previous cases I examined days after the change. Now we have Daas. He has been changed during the last twenty-four hours."

As she talked her hands moved surely over the complex controls of the assistant machines. With inhuman dexterity Anthur Daas' head was shaved clean and dried. The anaesthetic machine and white drapes covered him completely. All that was exposed was the ruddy top of his head. Adlan moved a long-range microscope into position and gazed intently through the eyepiece.

It was a very short time before she gasped and adjusted the fine focus. When she straightened up she was smiling.

"Take a look," she said. "It was much easier to find than I expected. Of course I had a good idea of which area to search first."

Brek was still puzzled after he looked through the scope. "Looks like a tiny loop of

wire, half embedded in his scalp," he said.

"Then just wait a moment and you'll understand," Adlan told him.

She swabbed antiseptic on the spot, then made a tiny incision with a microscopic scalpel. It took another moment for her to find the right instrument. She finally selected one that ended in a pointed hook, like a very small dental pick. With infinite care she worked it through the loop of wire; stopping only once to clear away blood that obscured her view. Once the loop was impaled she pulled up with a steady motion.

A length of thin wire was pulled up through the skin. At the end of the wire was a tiny tube no thicker than a pencil lead.

"I see it," Brek said, "but I'm just as much in the dark as before. What in the devil is it?"

At the same moment Adlan opened her mouth to answer him there was a loud crashing at the outer door.

"Is there another way out of here?" Brek asked quickly.

She slipped the little tube into her pocket, still calm and assured.

"Just an emergency escape tube," she said. "The car goes down to the sub-basement."

"Let's hope they don't know about it," Brek said as they ran to the hatch.

The capsule was waiting when he opened the hatch. It was cushion-lined against acceleration and barely big enough for one person. While Adlan was opening her mouth to argue Brek caught her up in a cruel grip and forced her into the capsule. He had a single glimpse of her frightened face as he thumbed the button and slammed the hatch. The capsule screamed down the tube with a dying whine.

The guards burst through the door in overwhelming numbers before it returned. By the time the capsule was back and opened its door in invitation, Brek was struggling on the floor. The man who finally went down in the capsule was a guard sergeant. He came back dead.

Brek was unconscious by this time and knew nothing about it.

WHEN he next opened his eyes, he was clamped in an interrogation chair. Across the room, lolling at ease, sat the master of Dubhe IV.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Otalmi said. "I've always wondered what you Profession men were like. I'm

very pleased to find out that you are like all other men. A bit better perhaps—I'll give you that much. But no match for me."

The secret police chief was short, fat and ugly. He sat there preening himself like a bird of paradise. His ego was tremendous. Looking at the fat, wet lips and cold yellow eyes, Brek knew that his death was a certainty.

Otalmi smiled and looked more like a leering gnome than ever. "I will be generous with you," he said. "Answer my questions completely and I will give you your freedom."

Brek cleared his throat and spat square in Otalmi's face.

"Save your pitiful lies and get the killing over with," he said. "You'll learn nothing from me." There was no boasting in his voice, it was simply a statement.

Anger washed the blood from Otalmi's face as he wiped at it with his handkerchief. With a wordless curse he sprang at Brek, beating his face with knotted fists. Brek made no attempt to pull away; he just shut his eyes. After a few moments, Otalmi's anger waned in the face of the other's indifference and he stopped the futile attack. He stepped back, breathless, and shook his blood-covered fist in

front of Brek's battered face.

"You'll pay for that," he shouted. "Oh, how you're going to pay! I'm not going to torture you—physical torture would be too easy. You're going to find out my little secret, the one you have been searching for. You're going to become my man—my creature—happy to do whatever I ask. And then, I am going to send you back to your own world to destroy it and all your friends. Not yourself, though—I want you to live and remember what you have done."

The words washed through Brek's mind and meant scarcely anything. He was occupied with the one important task left to him—how to kill himself in the fastest way. Not for a second did he doubt the power of the angry little man before him.

The guards were well-trained and didn't give him a chance. The interrogation chair was rolled onto a powercart. With one guard at the controls and the others walking beside it, the cart rolled deeper into the giant police building. Leg, arm and neck clamps held him rigid as a statue. Though he was still wearing the stolen police uniform, he felt strangely naked. All the pressures against his body were gone, the spots

where his equipment and devices had been concealed. They seemed to have found them all. For one moment he cherished the hope that Otalmi would be present when they tried to open his case of grenades. There was only one combination of the twenty-three possible ones that opened the case. The other twenty-two detonated the entire contents at once.

Into an elevator and down countless floors. He paid no attention to their route as he had no intention of retracing it. Doors opened and closed and bright lights beat down from overhead. The walls were a sterile white. The cart rolled through a last set of doors and stopped in what was obviously an operating room.

This was the end. Brek sensed it. The device that Adlan had removed from Anthur Daas' head had been implanted by surgery. Probably in this same room. Now he was going to get the same treatment—and he couldn't escape. Not by dying or any other way.

The interrogation chair was unloaded next to the operating table and the guards gathered around him. There would be a moment when he was free of restraint as the

shackles were released on the chair, before he could be clamped to the table. The guards knew it as well as he did and were ready. It would be his last chance and he had to take it.

While one of the guards bent to operate the chair's mechanism, Brek took a fast glance around the room. The door was closed, so there would be no interference from outside. There was a single doctor waiting for his patient. A nurse, her back turned, bent over a table of instruments. Eight to one.

Two guards held his arms as the shackles were released. Brek let them drag him to his feet, waiting for the best moment to act. His reactions were speeded up by the knowledge that it was now or never. While he watched the guards, he was slowly aware that the nurse had turned around.

She had a radiation pistol in her hand. Only it wasn't a nurse. It was Adlan.

BREK didn't stop to search for explanations, he just acted. He saw her swing the pistol toward the guards on his right. As she pulled the trigger, he acted. The hard line of flame snapped out and two

guards were killed with the single shot. Brek hurled himself on the other guards at the same instant.

It was a short, bitter fight with only one possible conclusion. Brek tangled with the four remaining guards so they couldn't draw their guns. One of them rolled free; before his gun could clear its holster he was dead. Adlan stood calmly on the edge of the struggling knot of men, pistol pointed and waiting for the opportunity to fire.

Brek's elbow caught a guard under the chin and he fell backwards. The pistol spat flame and it was a corpse that hit the floor.

Adlan stepped in close and killed one of the remaining men while Brek broke the other's neck.

The spotless operating room now looked like a charnal house with smoking bodies and runnels of blood across its white surface. Brek looked at the surgeon who still stood next to the table. He hadn't moved during the fight.

"What about him?" Brek asked, motioning towards the doctor.

"He's our good friend," Adlan said. "Doctor Tirfor. Even though he is Otalmi's trained seal, he let me in here.

When I knew the police had you I went at once to see him, figuring that was the only way I could help. He's one of the best brain surgeons in Angvis, even though he works for these carrion. I guessed he would be seeing you—luckily I guessed right."

Doctor Tirfor stood still while she talked, making no attempt to answer. His eyes were lowered and he shivered a little. Brek took a single glance at the man, then dismissed him from his mind.

"You had better fix up my face," he said. "Then we can get out of here the same way you got in. I doubt if we have much time."

Working together, Adlan and Doctor Tirfor made fast work of the damage. Torn flesh was patched swiftly and the discolored bruises vanished under a thin layer of plastiflesh.

Blood-stained and torn, Brek's uniform jacket was a mess. He stopped just long enough to throw it away and pull on the jacket of the guard with the snapped neck. A handful of razor-sharp scalpels went into the side pocket.

"Let's go," he said.

Doctor Tirfor led the way without a word and they followed him through a winding



course of corridors and spiral stairways that ended up far below ground level. Brek had a scalpel in his cupped hand when they passed other policemen, but there was no trouble. A last automatic door led into the garage area. A sleepy-looking man in the control booth yawned as he examined them.

"Want your car, doc?" he finally asked.

Doctor Tirfor nodded and the man punched a code number into the board in front of him. Within a minute, the delivery elevator lowered and

the car rolled up to the booth.

"Let's have your passes," the operator said.

Brek turned back to him and reached into his pocket. When the man brought his hand up for the pass, Brek plunged one of the scalpels through the man's palm. The operator sat, paralyzed, looking unbelievably at the shiny metal that projected from both sides of his hand and the slow drops of blood that dripped down.

Leaning forward, Brek held a second scalpel close to the other man's face.

"See how easy it is?" he said. "I could have put that into your heart as easily as into your hand. That's where this one will go if you do anything the slightest bit wrong."

The operator wasn't stupid or a coward—but the sudden brutality had unnerved him completely, as Brek had intended. The man could barely nod as he stared at his wounded hand.

"Now," Brek said, "turn around slowly and use your good hand. Point to the switch that opens the gates or does whatever is necessary to get us out of here."

Shivering with shock and pain, the operator pointed to a button. Brek leaned in until he could read the words under it: *Interlock release—ramp exit*. It looked all right.

"Press it," he told the man. "If anything different happens you will be dead instantly."

It seemed to be the right switch. Brek waited a few seconds, then rabbit-punched the man into unconsciousness. A moment later, he was in the car and they were driving up the ramp, Adlan at the wheel. A last turn and the heavy gate was ahead. Closed.

Adlan didn't slow down, just drove towards it. The car

must have actuated a release because the door swung silently open. Then they were out in the street and driving to safety.

WHEN they were well away from the police building they abandoned the car and Doctor Tirfor. He clutched Adlan's arm and spoke for the first time.

"Don't leave me like this. Remember your promise. I did everything you asked; got you into the building and helped you escape. Now give me the antidote. One-day poisons can be dangerous, even with the antidote. It was a bargain—you promised."

Adlan smiled at the worried man. "What antidote, doctor? What are you talking about?"

"Don't play with me," Doctor Tirfor begged. "That injection you gave me—the poison. I don't want to die . . ."

"That injection was pure distilled water, doctor. Just as effective as poison on a man with a conscience like yours. Now I would suggest you stop wasting time and try to get away. Otalmi must want you now just as much as us."

The doctor choked over a curse and the car ground gears and vanished down the

avenue. Brek looked at Adlan with a new respect. This was a woman that a Profession man could appreciate. He followed her quietly when she hailed a robocab and gave it directions.

They didn't talk while they made their way through the sleeping city. It was almost dawn, the first green light of the sun lighting the sky. They found their refuge at the rear of a monolithic building of white stone.

"It's the State University," Adlan said, breaking the silence. "We have friends here. The government was just as corrupt before Otalmi took over. We have an organization, mostly scientific workers, who were united in mild protest against the oppression. Now, of course, Otalmi is the enemy. We'll be safe here."

Adlan had keys and knew the way. At that early hour they met no one. She led him to the physics laboratory and the base of a giant atomic reactor. He didn't stop her when she began to spin the lock at a door in its base, but he had to ask.

"Unless my eyesight has failed me, those signs say: *Danger, Radiation and No Passage Past this Point.* Should this matter to me?"

"Not very much," she answered. "That's the beauty of this retreat. The real reactor wall is ten feet behind this one, leaving just enough space for a very safe room. I'm sure we'll have privacy here."

They were inside then and she sealed the heavy door behind them. It was a long, bare concrete room with minimum facilities. Brek dropped onto one of the bunks and let himself relax for the first time in countless hours.

"If you don't mind," he asked, "I'd like to know what that was you found in Anthur Daas' head? It seems to be the answer to Otalmi's power."

"It is," she said, sitting down next to him. "And it is so obvious that I want to kick myself for not thinking of it earlier. That gadget is nothing more than a microscopic radio receiver with an aerial. It pulls in a recorded message that is repeated-over and over. I went to my apartment before I picked up Doctor Tirfor and listened to the message. It says: *Otalmi is my friend . . . my best friend . . . I will do anything for Otalmi . . . I am devoted to Otalmi. . .*"

"But it doesn't make sense," Brek interrupted. "How can that sort of drivel convince anyone?"

"That's the danger," Adlan

told him. "It *can* convince anyone—if it is in the right spot. The message feeds directly into the brain, to the centers of motivation. What used to be called the *égo*. It's been said often enough that man is not a rational animal—but a *rationalizing* one. This has always been true. We want something first—then we find reasons to justify our desires. This machine of Otalmi's changes a man's viewpoint. It convinces his unconscious mind that he likes the tyrant—and his mind finds reasons to explain this changed attitude. It is a powerful weapon and one almost impossible to fight."

"We're not going to fight it," Brek said. "We're going to destroy it. That will fulfill the terms of my contract."

Adlan leaned her head against his shoulder while he talked. It was as natural as that, her transformation from scientist to woman. He touched her soft hair with his hand and felt the warmth of her hips pressed against his. Without a word being said, their lips found each other.

CHAPTER IV

THEY SLEPT until they were rested, then cooked a monstrous breakfast. Adlan talked

to someone over the phone who told her the entire city was being turned over, looking for them. Neither of them minded their enforced imprisonment. Altogether, it was four days before they could think of leaving the retreat. It sped by like four hours.

"That's it," Adlan said as she hung up the phone. "The intense search is over and we should be able to leave the city. But what do we do? What *can* we do—two people against the entire world?"

"I have one idea," Brek answered. "Unless you can come up with a better one, it's worth a try."

"Well, that's one idea more than I have," Adlan said. "Let's hear it."

"I think that logic alone can lead us to Otalmi," Brek said. "That word is misused a lot, but it still contains truth. First off—we know that there is a machine that sends a message out that these tiny receivers pick up."

Adlan nodded agreement.

"There are probably a number of slave transmitter-receivers that pick up the original signal and re-transmit it; we don't have to count them. I'll stake my life on the fact that there is only one *original* transmitter and that it is not here in the city."

"I follow you so far," Adlan said. "But what makes you think it isn't in Angvis?"

"It can't be," Brek said. "The only safe spot would be the B.I.S. building. Otalmi wasn't in the building the first time I was there and didn't seem to be worried by my presence. The important fact is that *he* wasn't there. He called on the visorphone in his office, probably from some safe hideaway. I'm sure the transmitter is in the same spot."

"But how can we ever find it?" Adlan asked. "We have no way of tracing his movements."

Brek took paper and a scribe from the wall rack and started to sketch rapidly. "Otalmi was too confident," he said. "When he appeared on the screen I had more than enough time for a good look at him. There was a large window behind him and mountain peaks visible through the window." He finished the drawing and showed it to her.

"Here are the outlines of the mountains and their relative heights. You said this is a university we are in, didn't you?"

Adlan nodded, still puzzled, as he went on.

"There must be a department of topology here—and I

hope a good topologist who is on your side. I'm sure he will be able to find exactly the spot on this planet where Otalmi stood."

PROFESSOR KOSTI was a birdlike man with a vacant stare. He was also the best topologist in the system. After asking Brek a few questions and carefully measuring the sketch he wandered off. Within three hours, he was back with a map of Dubhe IV.

"In spite of the crudeness of your drawing," he said, "I have pinpointed the only place it could possibly be. I have even allowed for a relative estimated error of ten per cent on your part—and the result is still the same. I've marked the location here on this detailed map." He pointed to a red-circled area. "It's in the Conciso Mountains about two hundred kilometers north of here."

Brek grabbed eagerly at the map and began tracing the contours with his finger. "It shouldn't be too hard to reach," he said. "These hills aren't too bad, yet they could give plenty of cover."

"On the contrary," Professor Kosti said drily, "I took the liberty of checking with some of our people before

bringing the map to you. People who are in a position to know about such things. They tell me that they have known of this area for some time. They thought there was some sort of military installation in there because of the strict security network that surrounds it. It's impossible to get in there and they have lost some good men trying."

Brek's only answer was a half-smile. "I think there is a way in," he said. "If you really look for it."

It was harder to find than he thought it would be. He talked to veteran agents who had touched the wall of the defense perimeter and knew what he had to face. Defense in depth. Starting with simple alarms and mines and ending up with fixed gun positions. It took three days of discussion and poring over photographs before he found the—to him—weak spot in the defenses.

Adlan found him packing equipment for the try at the stronghold. "I'm going with you," she said. "Nothing you say to me could possibly talk me out of it."

"Fine," he answered. "I'll put together an outfit for you."

It was the one answer she hadn't expected and she gasp-

ed, groping for words. "But—you mean . . . just like that? No arguments?"

Brek turned and took her gently by the arms. "Don't expect me to give the pat answers of your society," he said. "Remember, I live by a different set of rules. I appreciate you as a woman—and admire your talent as a surgeon. But I have to treat you as a *person*, neither better nor worse than anyone else. You are capable of making up your own mind—and I can use you on this expedition. So, by all means, come."

A PLANE landed them outside the defense perimeter after dark and Brek led the way to a position he had carefully memorized from the maps. By land or air they could only get in by fighting—so they took the remaining route. They wore waterproof suits and diving lungs. After adjusting each other's oxygen supply, they slipped quietly under the black surface of the water.

Brek could see well enough with the infra-red flashlight, heavy goggles strapped over his eyes. Adlan followed, looking like a strange water creature in her bulky suit and thick goggles. The light cut

a black-and-white swathe through the darkness as they let themselves drift downstream with the current.

The wire net stretched from bank to bank and extended a few feet above the surface. Brek waved Adlan to a stop, then went forward to investigate. The wire strands were insulated with clear plastic and very easy to cut. That meant they were meant to trigger an alarm, not impede progress. A careful search of the bank where the net ended showed a naked wire that apparently ended in the water. Brek thought for a second, then pulled the wire clippers from his belt.

The ground wire in the stream *should* mean that the warning net was part of a normally open circuit. If he cut the wire, it would ground to the water in the stream and set off the alarm. If he was wrong—and the wire was a normally *closed* circuit—cutting it would set off the alarm.

A calculated risk is always part of a Profession man's job. Brek scarcely considered the danger. He wrapped a gob of insulating putty around the wire and carefully moved the wire cutters into the putty. The wire snapped easily and he carefully molded the putty over the ends of the wires be-

fore removing the cutters. Apparently nothing happened and he quickly cut two more wires, making a hole big enough for them to get through. In a moment, they had passed the barrier and were drifting swiftly away.

Keeping careful track of the twists and turns of the stream, Brek estimated they were about halfway to their objective. He was tempted to relax—but didn't dare. His worries were justified. There was a quick glimpse of something metallic ahead. After stopping Adlan, he moved slowly down to investigate.

When he returned he had his finger to his mask where his lips would be, asking for silence. There was a waterproof pad on his wrist and he quickly printed a message there. She read it as he wrote.

Microphones in water ahead. Don't talk or let metal touch. Quiet! Quiet!

Silent as twin shadows they drifted downstream. He kept the invisible beam of light on the microphones so they could keep clear. Sweat rolled down Adlan's body as she hesitantly made her way past the shining metal tubes that hung from the blackness above.

That was the last obvious menace. An hour later, they surfaced in a quiet pool that

should have been their goal.

And there, on the bank, was a squat and comfortable country lodge, a rich man's retreat. It looked harmless and relaxed with light spilling from the wide windows. But it was exactly on the spot Professor Kosti had told them to look.

"That must be it," Brek whispered to Adlan whose head appeared next to his. They had their masks off and breathed in gratefully the freshness of the mountain air after the hours of canned stuff. For a minute they drifted that way, heads close and hand-in-hand. Then he pulled free and paddled silently towards the dark shore.

"Let's get in there and get it over with," he said.

Dropping their suits and diving gear back into the water they moved through the shelter of the trees towards the house. There was a sloping meadow of smooth grass that led up to the lodge. Brek stopped at the edge so suddenly that Adlan bumped into him. She started to say something, then followed his pointing finger. And froze.

A metallic pipe broke the smooth surface of the grass. It rose a meter above the ground and was topped by a cluster of globes and lenses. One of them was slowly turn-

ing towards the two people hidden in the darkness.

Either sound or the heat of their bodies had activated it. Rock-still, holding their breath, they watched the disc turn to face them and on a bit. It stopped, then hesitantly came back a few degrees.

At the same instant the blinding beam of light bored into the grove, a siren in the base of the machine set up a piercing wail. The night was smashed apart by the sudden light and noise. An automatic gun joined the commotion, firing down the path of light.

Brek hadn't waited for the alarm. He broke from cover with Adlan after him. The light had to swing to follow them as did the gun. Lights were flaring up on all sides, dragging unwanted attention toward the two running figures.

They lived to cross the lawn because the guards weren't as alert as their machines. Before the first one appeared, Brek and Adlan reached the building, diving towards an open window. Brek rolled as he hit the floor and the beam only burned wood behind him. His shot caught the gun-wielder in the throat. Then he was on his feet, hurling himself at another man who was just pulling his own gun.

It was Otalmi and Brek wanted him alive. He banked his speed against the other's gun and made it just before Otalmi could tighten down on the trigger.

A smashing open hand knocked the gun aside, then he had the police dictator in his hands.

ADLAN had badly wounded the only other man in the room, but there were voices and the thud of feet outside.

Less than a minute later, the guards ran by on the terrace outside, one of the officers looked into the room. Otalmi was sitting with two strangers, very much at ease.

"The alarm, sir," the officer said, "we don't know what happened—"

"It wasn't important," Otalmi said slowly. "These people came—the alarm went off by accident. You can call your men back now."

The officer saluted and left. He didn't see the two bodies behind the large couch. Neither did he attach any importance to Brek's hand that lay along the back of the couch. That was because he didn't see the knife in Brek's hand, or the tip of the knife that was sunk into the roll of flesh in the back of Otalmi's

neck. The point was almost touching his spinal cord—the slightest twitch of Brek's wrist and he would be dead.

Sweat ran down the dictator's face and his nerve cracked when the officer left.

"Take it out," he croaked. "I did what you asked—you can't kill me now."

Brek looked at the man with a thoughtful air and didn't move the knife. "Not yet," he said. "This is giving me a splendid idea. But first, take us to this machine that we have traveled so far to see."

Step by slow step, Otalmi led the way to the rear of the building; Brek following, knife in hand. A series of doors led them back until they realized the lodge faced the cliff and that they were penetrating deep into the earth.

It was a very ordinary-looking machine when they found it, yet it held a world in bondage. In a facing room was what looked like a surgery.

Otalmi was released from the knife point and clapped a handkerchief to his bloody neck. Some of his spirit came back with his freedom.

"You're the sort of man I like, Brek Han-Hesit. The kind of man I can use in my organization—" Brek stopped him with an upraised palm.

"You're not the kind of man I like, Otalmi, so let's not waste each other's time. Besides, I have an interesting future planned for you. You are going to be the next victim of your own machine. You can do the operation, can't you, Adlan?"

"Can I do it?" she asked. "With the utmost pleasure. I even think I can improve on the original technique. With the receiver moved a few centimeters it would not only have a subtle control but—"

"I'll take your word," Brek laughed. "Now, let's do it before anything interrupts."

Otalmi's face had gone dead white. He lurched forward with a hoarse cry. Brek moved at the same time but was a microsecond too late. The dictator's finger hit a stud on the control board and alarm sirens sounded from all sides. Otalmi slumped down, unconscious, but the damage was already done.

"Lock the doors," Brek shouted. "If we are going to live to get out of this hole, we will have to do the operation. And fast."

IT WAS the kind of surgery that should never be done—yet has to be done. Brek carried Otalmi in and Adlan had

the anesthesia machine hissing before his body was dropped on the table. Ultrasonics sterilized his scalp and she made the primary incision before the machine had swung clear. And the background to her hurried precision was the shriek of sirens and the thud of running feet.

Adlan was delicately inserting the receiver when the first fists hammered on the locked door. She hesitated, but her hand was steady when she went back to her task. All Brek could do was stand by, knowing that this part of the job was up to her.

Then the receiver was in place and the incision closed. While Adlan disconnected the repeater tape from the broadcaster, Brek carried the dictator's body to the outer room. He had just placed him in a chair when the door burst open.

An officer half-jumped, half-fell in. He looked puzzled when he saw the two men sitting quietly there. Brek saw Adlan working at the board so all he could do was hope.

Otalmi raised his head and looked at the officer with unseeing eyes.

"Sir," the man said, "the alarm came from here. And we found General Paatsik and

his aide dead in your office. What's wrong—?"

Otalmi opened his mouth and started to speak—pointing an accusing finger at Brek at the same time. The words seemed to stop in his throat and for a long instant he sat there, pop-eyed with internal pressure.

Then the arm dropped limply to his lap and his features relaxed with submission.

"Nothing is really wrong, captain," he said. "At least not now. General Paatsik was a traitor. This man brought me the evidence. He had to be disposed of. Setting off the alarm was an accident. You may go now."

The captain started to voice a question, then thought better of it. Otalmi was all right and the captain knew he always had to obey Otalmi's desires. He saluted and went out.

"That was close," Brek said when the shattered door was swung shut.

"Closer than you realize," Adlan sighed. "I could revive him, but at first I couldn't get control. He's ours now. Whatever I tell him through the machine he will believe as his own heartfelt desire. What I tell him to forget will never have existed."

"Wonderful," Brek laughed. "Convert him to an active member of your underground party and he can stay in charge. Let him have the trouble of fixing up this world that he has destroyed. I can't think of a better judgment to pass on him. Far better than a clean death. Then I will destroy the machine and my contract will be completed."

"And then," he sighed, "I can forget this pest-ridden planet and return to more civilized worlds."

There was a thin worry line between Adlan's eyes. It was the only sign she gave that she might be concerned in any way about his decision. Brek stood up and reached for her.

"Unless you feel differently," he said, "and decide you must stay on Dubhe IV. In that case, I might change my mind."

"Don't bother," she said. "I think I might like to see this abominable planet of yours. Sounds interesting. And I have a feeling that things will be very dull around here now with Otalmi heading the reconstruction program."

"Offer accepted," Brek said softly into her ear.

Otalmi looked at his two closest friends and smiled with happiness.





THE BOOK-SPACE

Reviews by Calvin M. Knox

WASP, by Eric Frank Russell. Avalon Books. \$2.75.

This never-before-published book is Eric Frank Russell's first novel-sized exploration of a theme he has often dealt with in short stories and novelets: the utter confusion an Earthman can wreak against alien beings in wartime, the action taking place on the home ground of the aliens.

In this case the home ground is Jaimec, one of the ninety-odd worlds of the Sirian Empire, and the hero is a Terran undercover agent named James Mowry whose job it is to cause as much bewilderment as possible on the home front and weaken the Sirians for direct military attack.

Mowry is dropped on Jaimec alone, disguised as a Sirian and equipped with a good-sized arsenal, a fortune in fake Sirian money, and thirty or

forty sets of forged identity cards. He sets to work immediately, creating confusion and disrupting the activities of the Sirian secret police and military by making them all chase after him—much as a wasp flying in an open auto window can, by buzzing in the driver's face, single-handedly cause the destruction of four or five much larger beings and a couple of tons of complex machinery. This explains the apt title.

Russell toys with an interesting concept: the ultimate underground organization, one which is so secret that not even its own members know of its existence. This is the *Dirac Angestun Gesept*, which by the time Mowry is finished has risen to the status of a major menace on Jaimec, even though it has no actual membership.

Readers familiar with the

work of this veteran English writer can expect the usual Russell treats: light-hearted prose rich with flippant dialog, constant inventiveness of style, and steady suspense. The characterization in *Wasp* is not particularly deep, nor is there much difference between the alien planet and, say, Germany in the Hitlerian era. But Russell's infectious headlong gusto makes this book one of the best of the Avalon series so far.

In short, nothing profound here—but good fun from the first page to the last.

●

THE VARIABLE MAN AND OTHER STORIES, by Philip K. Dick. Ace, 35¢.

The first American-published collection of the shorter works of Philip K. Dick, author of *Solar Lottery*, *Eye in the Sky*, and several other fine Ace-published novels in recent years.

This generous (252-page) book offers a short novel and four novelets: the title story and "Second Variety" from Lester del Rey's defunct *Space Science Fiction*, "The Minority Report" from *Fantastic Universe*, and a pair of *Galaxy* novelets, "Autofac"

and "A World of Talent." All five demonstrate amply Dick's imaginative fertility and brisk pace, as well as his ability to juggle complex concepts (particularly well in "The Minority Report," which brings some new approaches to the familiar science-fictional theme of detecting crimes before their commission).

Tension mounts admirably from page to page of these five stories; each is long enough to allow Dick to create a definite mood and a fully-detailed background. The title story is probably the most stimulating; the last, "A World of Talent"—a routine psi story—is the weakest. But each of the five is an exciting experience in itself. Very highly recommended.

●

THE CITY AND THE STARS, by Arthur C. Clarke. Signet Books, 35¢ (Reprint).

This represents a return for Clarke to his first novel, *Against the Fall of Night*, after ten years. *The City and the Stars* is a new version, nearly twice as long, of the short and now out-of-print ATFON.

The story, set in the unimaginably distant future, is

that of Alvin of Diaspar, youngest of the immortal people of Earth, and his quest into the world beyond the city of Diaspar. The tone of the original novel was a poetic one, and Clarke has preserved and heightened it here, while strengthening some plot crudities and introducing a number of new characters, including a fairly superfluous girl friend for the young hero.

The book is on the slow side, and has a curiously archaic flavor; perhaps it was a mistake for Clarke to attempt the expansion. But despite this, the new version is hauntingly effective, and provided this particular reader with the quality that originally led him to read science fiction: the sense of the far distant future, where our world is just a dot at the dawn of time. Since the original version is unobtainable, new science fiction readers would be well advised to pick up this edition and make the acquaintance of this beau-

tifully-conceived, unforgettable future world.

•

ROGUE IN SPACE, by Fredric Brown. Bantam Books. 35¢ (Reprint).

An unconvincing novel of space adventure by the author of that wacky masterpiece *What Mad Universe*. Protagonist here is Crag, a pretty worthless sort who meets a well-deserved doom halfway through the novel, then is brought back to life by the good offices of a sentient asteroid who is the true "rogue" of the title.

It's a readable book, and a tolerably well-written one considering the general implausibility of the major premise. Readers who like sf without reservations and whose tastes lean toward action and adventure might like this one; the more critical are warned herewith.



BOOK NOTES

Keep your eyes on the pocketbook racks. Coming up soon as an Ace novel will be Calvin Knox's own "Chalice of Death" trilogy, re-titled *Lest We Forget Thee, O Earth!* There will be expanded-versions of other SFA novels in book form shortly, too. Remember where you saw them first!

3117

HALF-CREDIT

UNCIRCULATED

by **ALEXANDER BLADE**

How much is an ordinary man's life worth?

A half-credit? Twenty-five thousand?

To Macklin, the answer was—nothing!

Illustrated by **Richard Kluga**

MACKLIN rounded the windy corner and found himself staring at a shop whose glittering syntheon sign proudly announced:

F. AMADEO
COINS OF THE UNIVERSE

He nodded in satisfaction, standing there with his hands

jammed into his pockets to keep them warm; at best the climate of New Senegambia could be described as frigid. He quivered inwardly with desire for the drug.

Well, that was simple enough, Macklin thought. All he had to do was heist a single shiny coin and get it across town to Ibbetson. Ibbetson



would give him enough cash for the coin to keep Macklin supplied with *yith*-weed for the next couple of years. Just as simple as all that, Macklin thought.

He sauntered casually into the store.

It was a dim, dingy old place; glass cases on the walls were filled with gold pieces, shining silver crowns, coins of all the thousand worlds of the civilized universe. Ibbetson had described the layout perfectly while coaching him. Along one wall was a long counter, and behind the counter was a wizened little bald fellow who could only be the proprietor, Amadeo.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Macklin peeled his eyes from the wallfull of gold pieces and said, as Ibbetson had coached him to do, "Why, yes. I'm interested in Galactic Standard Half-Credit pieces, if you have any."

"We have quite a few," the old man replied. He reached under the counter and pulled out a velvet-lined tray containing several dozen of the large silver coins that now served as standard interstellar currency.

Macklin counted them up. He guessed there were about thirty of them in the tray; fifteen credits in good cash,

enough for a single shot of *yith*. He reined himself in. He was after bigger game than that.

"Are there any special dates, sir?"

Macklin nodded. "I'm interested in 3106, and 3120, and 3122. Uncirculated condition, of course."

Those were fairly common dates. The dealer extracted them from the tray and spread them out on the counter for Macklin's scrutiny. He picked them up, holding them carefully by the rims, and nodded as if a connoisseur. "Fine condition," he said after a moment.

"Yes. Lovely. And reasonable, too—only fourteen credits for the three of them."

Fourteen credits for one credit fifty in good cash, Macklin thought. It made no sense—but, then he wasn't a rabid coin-collector like Ibbetson.

Macklin grinned genially. "Not a bad price. Of course, the one I'm *really* interested in is the 3117 piece."

Amadeo chuckled as if Macklin had said something uproariously funny. "You know that there were only seven minted, don't you? Just seven in the entire galaxy?"

"Of course, I know that. Any coin-collector does."

"It was a special issue, that year. A few people were lucky enough to get them. But you couldn't get a man who owns one to part with his for anything."

"I understand you've been offered fifty thousand credits for yours, Mr. Amadeo," Macklin said smoothly.

"Uh — yes — that's right." The coin-dealer looked startled, but went on, "I wouldn't sell for any price."

"I don't blame you. You know, if I could only get a *look* at that coin, I think I could die happy."

Ibbetson had said those exact words to Macklin once, a few months before.

AMADEO was virtually gloating now. "I can tell you're a serious collector, sir. And I love displaying my treasure. Wait here."

Macklin waited, fidgeting. Amadeo vanished into the dim rear of the shop, and Macklin heard the sound of a safe swinging open. He leaned forward over the counter, staring down at the coins of Mars and Arcturus VI and even ancient ones from Earth, waiting.

Amadeo returned moments later. He held out a single coin in a lucite holder. Macklin

reached for it, but the old man snatched it hurriedly back.

"Sorry," he said. "I couldn't bear to let anyone else actually *handle* it. But you can look."

Macklin looked. It was an ordinary half-credit piece, very shiny, with the conventional galaxy-symbol on one side and the inscription **FIFTY HUNDREDTHS** on the other, along with the date, 3117. In *Lingua Spacia* around the rim were the words, *Valid on Every Galactic World*. Just an ordinary half-credit piece, Macklin thought.

"I suppose you'll never sell it," Macklin said. "Not even for a hundred thousand credits?"

"It would kill me to part with it."

"I'm afraid you're right," Macklin said. He took the neutrino gun from his coat-pocket and fired one quick, noiseless, undetectable blast. A look of betrayal appeared on the old man's face; then he slumped down behind the counter, clutching the coin-holder in his dead hand.

Hastily Macklin pried the box from the tightening fingers and dashed away. There was a radionic burglar-alarm in the store; it was probably functioning already, touched off by the discharge of his gun. He hoped not. Neutrino

guns were devilishly hard for radionic alarms to detect.

He bolted out into the street, then slowed to a more respectable walk. His left hand gripped the little plastic box.

One half-credit piece, 3117, uncirculated condition. Amadeo had refused Ibbetson's offer of fifty thousand credits several times. And Ibbetson had grown desperate.

Macklin shrugged. The pudgy coin-collector was willing to give him twenty-five thousand credits, cash on the line, for delivery of the coin. Macklin wasn't going to argue with that kind of money. He had killed before, and for less, when the yith-weed craving came over him and he had had no cash to purchase the drug.

HE CROSSED the street and entered a public communicator booth. Fishing in his pocket, he found a copper credit-tenth—he wondered whether it had any value to a coin collector—and he dropped it in the slot.

He punched out Ibbetson's number.

After a pause came the wealthy dilettante's slow, cautious "Hello-oo?"

"Ibbetson? Macklin here."

"Well? Well? Any luck? Did you get it? Tell me—did you—"

"Ease off, Ibbetson. The answer is yes."

"Marvelous!"

"I've got it right here in my pocket," Macklin said. "It comes in a little plastic case, so you don't have to worry about my greasy fingerprints. I'll be at your place in about an hour."

"Don't waste any time."

"Don't worry about me. Just have the cash ready when I get there."

He hung up. He remained in the booth a moment, getting his bearings; a little backwash of emotion was rippling over him now, as it always did immediately after a killing. He waited a moment more, then got up and left.

A cold wind was blowing in from the river as he started crosstown toward Ibbetson's. It would take just over an hour. He planned to use a combination of underground tube, monobus and foot-travel to get there. For all he knew, the very efficient New Senegambia police corps was already organizing a manhunt for the murderer of the dealer—and anybody with a rare coin in his pocket would be a prime suspect.

The first step was to cross Monument Arch Bridge and let the neutrino gun, wrapped in a scarf, "accidentally" fall

from his hands. It sank immediately; nobody seemed to notice.

He buried the stolen coin in an inner pocket of his jacket and entered an undertube station. He bought a ticket heading southward.

While he rode he thought about Ibbetson—a pudgy, moon-faced man in an elaborate silk dressing-down, who collected coins and stamps and antiques and women, and who insisted on having the best and most desirable of each, no matter what the cost. Amadeo had thwarted him by refusing to part with the coin—and Amadeo had paid heavily for his hobby.

"There's one thing I don't understand," Macklin had said, after Ibbetson had explained the proposition to him.

"What's that?"

"You say there are only seven of these coins in existence, and that everybody knows who the owners of them are. That means that if Amadeo dies and you pop up with the coin in your collection, you're immediately admitting guilt."

"Only if someone finds out about the coin," Ibbetson said.

"Won't you want to show it to other collectors, or do whatever it is coin collectors do with their rarities?"

"No. I want it only for myself," Ibbetson declared.

Macklin had not forgotten that. Ibbetson did not want the coin to use as a showpiece, nor to attract attention. He simply wanted to gloat over it in private, like a miser running gold through his fingers but never spending any of it. *Well*, Macklin thought, *that's his privilege. As long as he comes across with the dough.*

Twenty-five thousand credits. Enough *yith* for years.

AT THE South Darby station Macklin got off and transferred to the crosstown line; he went three stations, then melted into the crowd of northbound travellers heading for the Blue Line train, and transferred again. If anyone happened to be following him, this would thoroughly throw them off the trail.

He rode three stops north, got off again, and took the gravshaft to street level. There, he found a southbound monobus, boarded it, and sat quietly staring out the window as it headed out of the business section of the city and into the palatial estate-district where Ibbetson and other local millionaires had settled.

But Macklin did not intend to travel all the way into Mil-

lionaire's Row by bus. He rang for an exit many blocks from Ibbetson's place. By now it was getting dark; the moons were in the sky, and the weather was even more forbidding than before.

Macklin pulled his tattered coat around him and started to walk.

This was not a fashionable neighborhood, here at the border of the estate district. This was a slum, not much different from the seedy area at the north end of the city where Macklin lived. But twenty minutes on foot would bring him to Ibbetson's place. His hand stole into his pocket and he fingered the smooth plastic of the container for the rare coin.

He thought wonderingly, *Twenty-five thousand smack-ers for a half-credit piece.* Then: *Oh-oh.*

Two bulky men in the purple uniforms of the local police lurked suspiciously about half a block away. They seemed to be leaning against doorposts aimlessly, but Macklin had had enough experience with police to know that they *never* did anything aimlessly.

They were waiting for someone. Perhaps they were planning to spring a trap.

For him, maybe.

He decided to take no

chances. He swerved left, ducking into a dark alley. Brightness glimmered at the far end, indicating that the alley was a passageway to the next street, where he could resume his journey.

To be so close, he thought, and to be picked up. . . . *No.* They couldn't be searching for him. Not here, not yet. But he had to play it safe.

He moved carefully and quietly through the alley.

A guttural voice said suddenly, "Okay, buddy. Stand right where you are and put your hands over your head. I mean what I say."

Macklin stared. In the gathering darkness he could make out the burly figure of a Vegan, unshaven, even shabbier-looking than himself. The man had the wild-eyed look of starvation about him. He stank of stale alcohol.

He was holding a knife whose curved foot-long blade was four inches from Macklin's throat.

WHAT is this, a holdup?"

"You guessed it, pal." The Vegan spoke thick-tonguedly, wearily. "I'm looking for beer-money. Haven't had a drink in days. Hand over what you've got."

Macklin tensed, and his lips

became dry. If he handled this right, he could get away from this derelict without further complications.

He said, "I've got two coppers on me and that's all, friend. They're in my left-hand pocket if you want them that bad."

"Two coppers? Hell, that won't even buy me a drink and a half!"

"That's a tough break for you, Mac. Next time pick a wealthier victim."

"At least it's somethin'," the Vegan muttered. His paw of a hand groped into Macklin's pocket, closed on the two low-value coins, drew them out. He studied them disappointedly. Together, they amounted to a tenth of a credit. It was all Macklin had left, except—

"You ain't holdin' out on me, are you? This ain't much for a guy to be walkin' around with."

"That's all I have on me."

"I better take a look," the Vegan decided.

Macklin waited tensely while the lumbering creature pawed through his pockets, first one, then another, examining the contents of his wallet, and finally—

"Hey! You snake, you were holdin' out! Here's a semi, all packed up nice and shiny in a little box!"

Macklin's eyes bulged as the Vegan drew the half-credit coin from his pocket, pried open the plastic box, took the coin out. He tossed the box away and fingered the coin greedily, eyes glinting.

"You're getting fingerprints on it, you idiot!"

"Damned right I am," the Vegan snorted.

Macklin cursed the moment of over-caution when he had tossed the neutrino gun away. The derelict was ruining the coin; perhaps Ibbetson might not even want it, now.

"Thanks, bud. So long."

"Wait a minute." Sudden savage madness welled up in Macklin; he ran after the Vegan, caught him by the arm, spun him around.

"Give me that coin!"

"Some chance, buddy."

Macklin swung wildly; the Vegan laughed and caught his arm, twisted it, bent it back. Stunned, Macklin recoiled. He fumbled automatically in his pocket, looking for the neutrino gun that wasn't there, and looked up to see the shining arc of the curved blade once again approaching his throat.

He tried to dodge, but the Vegan dodged with him, and four inches of the blade plunged through his skin. Macklin blinked in surprise, then

coughed as the blood poured up into his mouth. Blinding pain shot through him.

He stood for a moment on weakening legs, then toppled forward into a garbage-heap in the alley. He struggled to rise. The Vegan was vanishing hurriedly.

"Come back . . ." Macklin called. His voice was nothing but a thick, incoherent garble. "The coin . . . the coin . . ."

Nobody heard him.

CLUTCHING the shiny half-credit piece, the Vegan rounded the corner and turned triumphantly into the saloon midway down the block. He noticed two policemen further ahead, but was not troubled by the sight.

The bartender looked up skeptically as he entered.

"Gimme beer," the Vegan grunted.

"I told you your credit was used up!"

"Hell with you. Got some cash."

He plunked the half-credit piece ringingly on the counter. The bartender picked up the coin, stared at it, finally put it to his mouth and bit.

"Guess it's real," he admitted finally.

He drew a beer for the slaving Vegan; then, casually, he spun the half-credit piece, caught it as it spun, and dropped it in the cash-register.

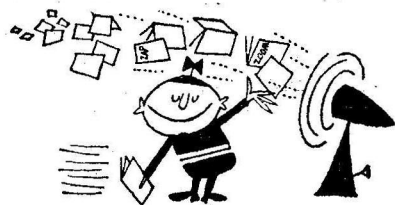
He gave the Vegan change—one quarter-credit and a tenth-piece—and shut the cash-register.



RUSSIA IN SPACE!

It could happen! If Reds ruled the Earth, and the crews of interstellar exploring vessels were composed of Reds and non-Reds . . . explosive tensions might result. Fierce mutiny would be a logical outcome. But if the "Whites" wrested control of the ship from the Reds, it would be a bitter victory, for they'd never be able to return to Earth and would have to go on searching the stars forever.

Intriguing? Certainly—but it's merely the beginning of *The High Ones*, an intensely compelling long novelet by Poul Anderson in the current issue of *Infinity*. From this starting point, Anderson describes what might happen if the ship met a totally alien culture. You've never read anything quite like this, and seldom read anything as good. Buy *Infinity*—today!



THE FAN - SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

CONVENTIONS! Coming up this year are three regional affairs that all sound good, not to mention the great big one in Los Angeles over the Labor Day week end. Had I but cash enough and time, I'd like nothing better than to attend them all, but that's as impossible for me as it is for most of you. If anyone of these cons is convenient for you, though, don't miss it—and you'd be well-advised to try to make the big one even if it isn't entirely convenient.

In the very near future is the Disclave, to be held May 10th and 11th at the Arva Motor Hotel, about a mile west of Washington on U. S. Route 50 in Arlington, Virginia. This will be a completely informal affair, with the emphasis on gab sessions. Lots of pros and fans from all over the Eastern seaboard will be

there, and it's sure to be a lot of fun. To attend, all you have to do is make a hotel reservation ahead of time. The chances are you won't be able to get a room without this. Otherwise, there are no dues or charges, and there will be no formal program, but there is bound to be lots of fun for all. For any further information you need, write to Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Avenue, Hyattsville, Maryland.

Also on the informal side will be the 9th Annual Midwestcon, to be held on June 28th and 29th at the North Plaza Motel, 7911 Reading Road, Cincinnati 37, Ohio. Again you make your own reservations directly to the motel, which features central air-conditioning plus a free swimming pool. The Midwestcons are a fixed tradition in fandom by now, and guaran-

teed to be enjoyable. The formal program is usually limited to a luncheon and movies of past conventions and fan-finish doings.

From Dallas, Texas, comes an announcement of the Southwestercon 6 (formerly the Oklacon). It will be held at the Hotel Dallas on the 4th, 5th and 6th of July. The banquet will be \$2.75 a plate. One of the highlights will be a masquerade brawl with a first prize of a free round-trip ticket on the plane being chartered by the Dallas Futurians to the Solacon. There will also be a world premiere of Paramount's new class A sf movie, "The Space Children."

Everyone is guaranteed a grand time. The fees will be \$1.00 for membership and \$1.00 for registration, and the committee would appreciate it if everyone would send in his membership dollar as soon as possible. Send fees and all correspondence to Tom Reamy, 4243 Buena Vista, Dallas 5, Texas.

●

AND UNLESS some other fan group takes pity on August and throws a shindig then, everybody can take that month off to prepare for the Solacon—otherwise the 16th

World Science Fiction Convention. And this one will be well worth preparing for. It's way out west where fans are fans, and conventions are *fun*.

The site will be the Hotel Alexandria, Los Angeles; the time the entire Labor Day week end. Richard Matheson has been selected as the guest of honor. For the program, all the old favorite features are being taken out and given a new sparkle, and the banquet and masquerade ball in particular are sure to be stand-outs.

To join the World Science Fiction Society, which sponsors the annual conventions, just send one dollar to Treasurer Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana Street, South Gate, California. If you're sure you'll be able to attend, you can add another dollar for your registration fee, although you can also pay that when you arrive if you prefer. Rates for a single room at the Alexandria start at \$5.00; for a double, \$6.50. You can send your reservation direct to the hotel, or to Secretary Len J. Moffatt, 10202 Belcher, Downey, California.

Midwest fans are organizing a motorcade for anyone wishing to drive to the convention; they'll do their ut-

most to find passengers for those with cars, and rides for those without. The cars in the 'cade won't necessarily stick together at all times, but will stop at the same place each night—and this could well turn into a wonderful traveling convention in its own right. For information, write to Nick Falasca, 5612 Warwick Drive, Parma 29, Ohio. Meanwhile, if you have any problem at all revolving around transportation to and from the Solacon, write to Frank and Belle Dietz and George Nims Raybin, 1721 Grand Avenue, Apartment 3N, Bronx 53, New York. This energetic trio will try to organize things so that no one has to travel alone, and everybody will have a happy time.

Finally, don't forget TAFF—the Transatlantic Fan Fund, which this year hopes to bring a fan from the United Kingdom over to enjoy the con, report to Stateside fans on the state of U. K. fandom, and carry a report back to them about us. It's a very worthy cause, which has had splendid results in the past. Candidates for the trip this year are John Berry, Ron Bennett, Dave Newman and Roberta Wild, all wonderful people deserving of the honor and the fun. You can vote for your favor-

ite by chipping in half a buck or more; to obtain your ballot, write to Bob Madle, 7720 Oxman Road, Hyattsville, Maryland.

And if you have trouble keeping all this straight, just remember "South Gate in '58"! The Solacon isn't actually in South Gate, but the fabulous Rick Sneary is, and he and his friends have made the slogan a fannish rallying cry for all of ten years.

And at the risk of repeating myself, I'll be there! I hope you will, too.

I SAID a while back that I would not be able to review fanzines as a general thing, but that doesn't mean—as some of you feared—that I won't announce new ones and give occasional histories and descriptions of outstanding older ones. So here's some dope on a couple of newcomers that have been clamoring for my, and your, attention.

Readers Digested comes from Leslie Gerber (and his partner Andrew Reiss), 201 Linden Boulevard, Brooklyn 26, New York, at the remarkably low subscription price of 10 issues for 50¢. RD is modest in size, but that's a good feature in this case because it enables the editors to put out

extras fast when they have hot news. So far, they've come up with a number of interesting and timely scoops. In addition to news, RD contains reviews and opinion, all of it lively. Give it a try.

Stony Brook Barnes (whose name sounds more like that of a farm than a fan, but it's things like this that make fandom interesting), Route 1, Box 1102, Grants Pass, Oregon, has begun publishing an unusually useful zine, *Vampire Trader*. VT has one function and purpose: helping fans and collectors. (No, George, not collectors of vampires, but of books, magazines and such.) VT is free (but please send stamps to cover postage), and so are its services: anyone can place an ad in its pages at no cost. This will appear monthly, and should be a big help to everyone concerned. My hat's off to you, Stony.

PERSONALS: Mrs. Lynn Griffith, Route No. 1, Eldred, Pennsylvania, is offering for sale her collection of 80 old sf magazines for \$80.00. Among them are *Unknown Worlds*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing*, *Super Science*, etc. . . . Richard H. Minter, 412 East 2nd Avenue, Draper, North

Carolina, has for sale several hundred sf and fantasy mags, ranging from the old *As-tounding* of the 1930's up to almost any mag that has been published since 1950. Prices start at 20¢ for the more recent issues and run to 75¢ for certain older ones.

For sale: *Galaxy SF*, Oct. '51 to Jan. '56. Also complete *SF Plus* and many first edition sf magazines published 1954-1956. Best offer takes all or any part of collection. Write for list to D. D. Spencer, 619 3rd Avenue, Seattle 4, Washington.

THE ENTIRE science fiction world was shocked and saddened recently by the deaths of two of the best writers in the field, Henry Kuttner and C. M. Kornbluth. Both were young, Kuttner in his early 40's and Kornbluth in his mid-30's. Both succumbed to sudden heart attacks. Each, in his writing, helped to enrich the field and possibly widen its borders a bit, and science fiction has lost a great deal in losing them.

THE NEWS of Kornbluth's passing was a particularly hard personal blow for me, since I valued his friendship

and had seen and spoken to him only a few weeks before, at the annual open meeting of the Eastern Science Fiction Association. Oddly enough, at this meeting Kornbluth was one of the members of a panel discussing Kuttner's contribution to the field. He seemed to be in the best of health, and spoke as incisively as ever on writers' responsibilities.

Aside from this one unhappy connotation, the ESFA meeting remains as a pleasant memory. Attendees were privileged to hear Willy Ley and Robert A. Heinlein in addition to the aforementioned panel, which also included Hans Stefan Santesson, L. Sprague de Camp and Larry Shaw, with Sam Moskowitz as moderator. All in all, it was a thoroughly worthwhile afternoon.

The ESFA itself is truly one of the stalwart old standbys of fandom, having an exceptionally long record of regular meetings and having put in untold hard work on numerous conferences, conventions and projects. Meetings are held the first Sunday afternoon of every month at the Slovak-Sokol Hall on

Morris Avenue in Newark; there is always an interesting speaker and plenty of good company. If you live in the area, you'd be doing yourself a favor by dropping in, and possibly signing up as a member. For further information, contact Director Allan Howard, 101 Fairmount Avenue, Newark 7, New Jersey.



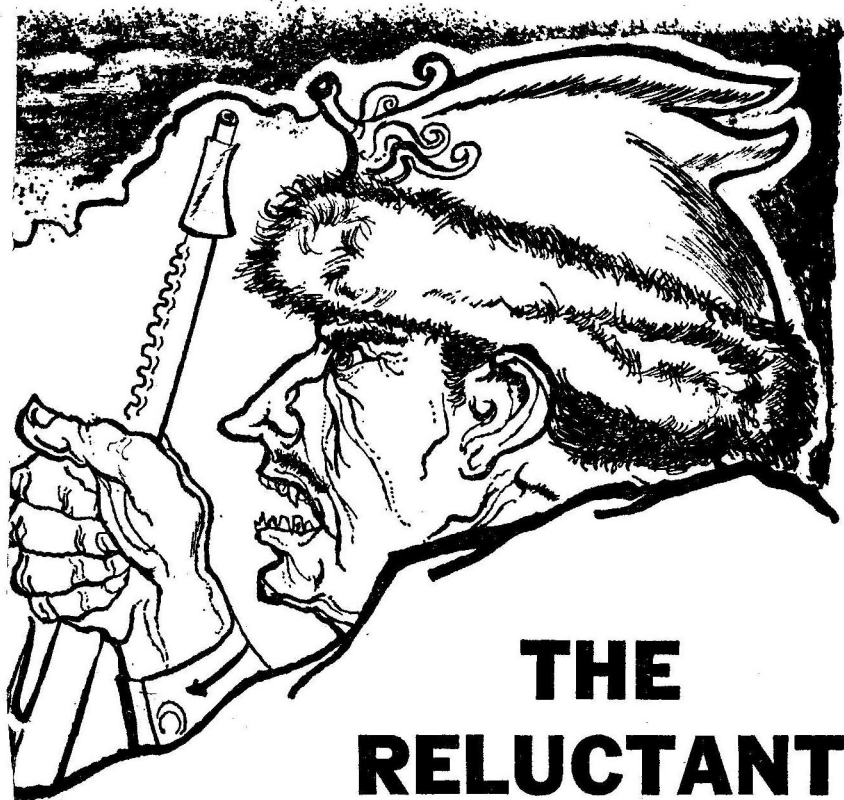
Did you know that SFA has a British edition, composed of reprints from the American version? It does—and the second issue will have appeared by the time you read this. It's published by Nova Publications, Ltd., the firm which also is responsible for those two fine British magazines, *New Worlds* and *Science-Fantasy*. We all feel good about it, and wish our new brother a lot of luck.

Harry ("The World Otalmi Made") Harrison is a globe-trotter; his latest address is in Italy. He reports that he spends his time writing and drinking vino, and that he and his family are happy.

That's it for now—see you around.







THE RELUCTANT TRAITOR

by RALPH BURKE

*Faylad was the best spy Donnobir had—
until he became a turncoat against his will!*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

The Reluctant Traitor

by Ralph Burke

BOTH of the suns, the red one and the blue one, had gone down, and it was that ghostly time in Donnobir between sunset and moonrise, when darkness hung like a shroud over the war-blasted city. Under cover of the blanket of night, Darrin Faylad dodged through the rubble-heaps of the South Side, heading northward toward the border that separated Imperial Donnobir from the besieged Terran Quarter.

He knew that somewhere behind him were Imperial troops, prowling through the battered streets in search of Terran spies. Faylad ran quietly and steadily, unable to check the impulses that drove him on to the sector of the hated Terrans.

It was a time of truce. They came, periodically, and lasted anywhere from two days to two weeks, while diplomats met at the heart of the city and tried to straighten out differences. But there was always some border incident to begin the fighting again, and even with the ban on nuclear weapons the destruction was frightful.

The present truce had lasted eight days, without incident, while a stalemate continued at the truce-tables of Imperial Hall. The truce was soon to be broken, though. Faylad knew it. A dead Terran spy had known it, too.

Faylad considered the message he was bearing to his enemies:

Imperial troops are moving on Donnobir from the south and west. They intend to break the truce and attack the Terran encampments. Donnobir disarmament talk is just a smokescreen for an intended treacherous attack some time at the end of this week.

Bitterly Faylad realized that this was a perfect night for slipping across the border. Only once a tenweek did both suns set simultaneously; the city was dark, and the first icy glimmers of the moon were still an hour in the future. *That gives me plenty of time to reach the Terran headquarters,* he thought bleakly.

For the thousandth time he struggled to break the strange compulsion that gripped him. He slowed momentarily, as he

managed to gain a little control over what had once been his voluntary motor neurons. But it was only momentarily; the inward compulsion pricked him on, on toward the Terran base, onward to give the vital secret message to the most deadly enemies of his people. . . .

AN HOUR before, Faylad had been in the Tavern of the Suns, a sleazy bistro far on the South Side, not far from the oil-slicked inlet that was Jaspell Bay. The Suns was his favorite drinking-place; there was plenty of elbow-bending, plenty of loose talk, plenty of valuable information for a shrewd listener.

And Faylad was shrewd.

He sat quietly in the corner, a tall, thin man with the olive skin and gray-black eyes of the pure-blooded Donnobiru, holding a clay flask of wine with his long hands and staring reflectively at the dancing-girl whipping her translucent skirts around her hips. His eyes looked at the girl, and his lips tasted the dark cold wine, but his mind was elsewhere, listening to the talk of the tavern about him.

"... this truce can't go on much longer. I understand the Terrans are planning a

sneak attack tomorrow night."

"No!"

"Indeed. Rumor even has it that they'll be using atomics."

"How dreadful!"

Faylad smiled thinly. The two who spoke were Donnobiru, well-known winebags who regularly swapped the "confidential" secrets they had just invented. He flicked a mental gear and blotted what he had just heard from his mind. He had no room for the delusions of drunkards.

His eyes traveled speedily round the room. Often, it was possible to find Terran spies here, sent across the city border to seek out Imperial secrets. Faylad had fingered more than one and sent him to the Imperial interrogation rooms for questioning.

Tonight there seemed to be none of the regulars here. Faylad frowned and returned his attention to the slim-thighed dancing-girl. He sipped the chilled wine, and toyed with the coins in his pocket.

It looked like a wasted night. Faylad regretted that; he would have nothing to report at dawn, when he went to Imperial Headquarters to deliver up his night's gleanings of espionage.

Then the Terran spy came in.

He pushed open the thick

oaken door of the tavern and stood uncertainly in the entrance, a short, thick-bodied man who looked like a native Donnobiru but who actually was merely a swarthy Terran. His name was Calder. Faylad had been watching him for four days; one day more was Calder's allotment, and then Faylad would capture him and turn him in for interrogation by Imperial experts.

But Calder looked oddly different tonight. His cloak was drawn tight, and so were his features; a mask seemed to lie across his face, tightening the flesh over his already sharp cheekbones, deepening the eyes in their sockets, making the thin down-thrust lips even more tense.

A tavern girl glided up to him as he stood there in the vestibule, but he shook his head impatiently and brushed his way past her. He was looking around the tavern, looking for someone, it seemed—

His eyes came to rest on Faylad. A grin broke the harsh mask of his face. Faylad smiled pleasantly at him, and for an instant they seemed both to be beaming, the Terran spy and the Imperial counter-spy.

Slowly and with unusual care Calder walked around the gang of chortling barflies ad-

miring the limbs of the dancing girl, and crossed the room to the place where Faylad sat, at a crude wooden table under a lead-barred window.

"Good evening, Faylad. Are you alone?"

Faylad nodded. "I would welcome company."

Calder delicately lowered himself into the seat facing the Donnobiru. Faylad became aware that the expression on the Earthman's face was definitely one of intense pain, and that Calder had spoken in a strangely constricted voice, as if he feared for some reason to speak too loudly.

He murmured, "Order me a drink, Faylad."

Faylad went to the bar and dropped a gold five-magnum piece on the counter.

"Wine," he said. The bar-keep shoved a mug across the counter at him, and a handful of silver change. Faylad counted through the money, pocketed it, and returned to his seat. He put the drink down before the Earthman.

"You look weary tonight, friend," Faylad said.

"I am." Calder clutched his drinking-mug. "To your health, Faylad."

"To yours. And to the Emperor."

"To the Emperor," Calder repeated.

They drank. The chilled wine coursed down Faylad's gullet, and his keen taste-buds detected a wrongness about the flavor; he wondered if perhaps the wine had spoiled, and then, as he felt the drug take hold of him, he realized he had been seven kinds of an idiot.

He had underestimated the Earthman. Calder had slipped something into his drink.

"Come with me, Faylad," the Earthman muttered.

It was an unconquerable compulsion. Faylad rose; and as he did so, he noticed that a trickle of blood was seeping through the thick green velvet of the Earthman's cloak.

THEY PASSED through the throng of barflies and out into the cool night. The last lingering rays of the blue sun Merro were dropping from the sky.

"Walk with me," Calder said. "Down toward the water."

Together they walked toward the bay, a hundred fifty yards away. Faylad's face locked rigidly; he felt bitter anger toward himself. He saw now that the Earthman was seriously wounded.

They arrived at the sea-wall, the concrete barrier five feet high that rimmed the shore of the bay. A cold wind blew in

from the faintly-heard sea.

Calder said, "Give me your arm, Faylad."

Faylad fought the order; his muscles bunched, and a torrent of adrenalin poured through his body as he struggled to disobey. But disobedience was impossible. His arm raised itself, seemingly of its own volition. With trembling fingers Calder unbuttoned the sleeve-fasteners of Faylad's leather jerkin, laying bare the biceps.

From someplace within his cloak he produced a tiny hypnospray; he held it over Faylad's bare arm a moment, then withdrew it. Faylad felt nothing.

"All right," Calder said. "Now the fixative's applied. You won't be able to countermand the effect of the earlier dose. Repeat after me, Faylad: the Emperor is a fat senile fool."

"The — Emperor — is — is — a — f-fat — sen — senile — fool."

The Earthman smiled. "It hurt, didn't it? I know; you couldn't help yourself. Well, it's a dirty trick to play on a fellow spy, but you happen to be on the wrong side in this business."

"How did you know—"

"Speak only when spoken to," Calder snapped, and Faylad became quiet. "Listen to

me, now: earlier this evening I conducted a little exploration of Imperial Headquarters. On my way out I got a bullet in my middle for my troubles. I'm not going to last more than ten or fifteen more minutes. And I want my information to get back to Terran headquarters. So you're going to carry it for me. Clear?"

Faylad listened and nodded reluctantly.

"Good."

Calder dictated the message; stonily Faylad listened. It was about the secret attack; it was damning material. Calder said, "You'll carry that message to Terran HQ and give it to the officer in charge. You'll make every effort to reach HQ safely, and you will go there immediately and without delay. You will not stop en route. If you are intercepted by any of the Imperial guards, you will make sure they let you proceed. And at no time are you to do or say anything that will jeopardize the safe delivery of this message. Got that?"

"I understand," Faylad said.

"Excellent. Now suppose you help me over this wall and into the water, eh? I wouldn't want Imperial troops to find my body."

Stiffly Faylad hoisted the heavy Earthman to the lip of

the sea-wall; Calder turned, grinned at him despite his pain, and shoved himself over. He dropped the nine feet down into the dark bay; Faylad saw him momentarily on the surface, but his thick clothing became waterlogged almost at once, and he sank, leaving a trail of black bubbles. . . .

IT HAD all taken perhaps ten minutes, from the drugging of his wine to the Earthman's suicide. Mingling with his hatred for the dead Terran Faylad felt undeniable admiration; it took courage to perform such a deception with a mortal wound letting out your blood, and it took courage to yield even the few remaining minutes of life to the dark waters of Jaspell Bay.

Faylad realized he had been placed in an impossible situation.

Without conscious command his feet began to move him. He was lithe, strong, swift, an experienced slinker and lurker. He could get safely to the Terran quarter, as he had done on so many previous occasions.

Faylad crouched and shuffled at a fast pace away from the water. The compulsion lay strong upon him. Bitterly he saw that Calder had chosen his

man well; like a wasp searching out the fattest worm in which to embed its eggs, Calder had clung to life long enough to seek out the one man most capable of crossing the border into Terran-occupied territory.

I have to stop myself, he thought. But it was impossible to rebel against the compulsion. Relentlessly, his feet took him forward. Relentlessly, he moved on. The border lay five miles ahead.

He turned up Blaze Street, passing the Temple and the Autumn Palace and the wreckage of what had been the Emperor's Theater until the night when a Terran infiltrator had detonated a bomb during an opera performance. The Emperor escaped unharmed; a hundred of his ranking officers had been killed in the blast.

Faylad's hand crept to his thigh. A packet of yellow nitrate capsules lay within his left-hand pocket; surely he would be able to maneuver one of them out and into his mouth quickly enough.

He was expendable. He knew that, and did not question it. Right now the greatest service he could perform for the Imperium was to destroy himself.

He filled his mind with thoughts of full-breasted danc-

ing girls, warm and smelling of civet-musk, leaping round a blazing fire. Sweat dribbled down his face as he guided his hand surreptitiously toward his pocket, slipped the lean fingers in, cupped in his palm the packet of poison-capsules, drew them out, tremblingly lifted one toward his mouth—

He hurled the packet high over a shattered wall with a sudden involuntarily jerking motion of his arm.

Despairingly he watched the packet vanish into the moonless dark. He stared at his left hand.

Traitor, he thought.

His left hand was an unwilling traitor to his body; he, an unwilling traitor to the Emperor. Fiercely Faylad cursed the devilish Earthman who had placed this drug-instilled compulsion upon him, while his feet kept him moving toward the Terran border.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER he had his first encounter with the border guard. There were three of them, sitting around a bonfire in the middle of the deserted street. Donnobir was like a cemetery, these days, with four-fifths of its population dead in the struggle that had raged between Terra and the Empire.

The guards squatted round the fire, warming their hands. They were harsh-looking men in the black and gold uniform of the Imperium; the gold of their uniforms was faded and yellowish, and Faylad realized that they had a woman with them, some camp-following slut.

He drew near, praying that one of them might be drunk enough to cut him down with a quick shot.

"Halt, you," a guard called out to him.

If I refuse to halt, they'll shoot me, Faylad reasoned. But reasoning was not enough. He was a prisoner within his own skull; his body was a slave to an Earthman who lay at the bottom of Jaspell Bay. He urged his feet to break into a panicky dash that would arouse suspicion; instead, he found himself halting obediently.

"Good evening, friends."

Two of the guards uncoiled themselves and rose, their hands on their rifle-butts. The third remained by the fire with the woman, ignoring him.

"Where are you going?" asked a guard in sergeant's uniform, a thin, hatchet-faced man with a livid scar running down his left cheek.

"Ahead," Faylad whispered.

"Ahead? To the border?"

Faylad nodded.

"You better have a good reason for going there," the guard told him. "We have orders to stop any suspicious characters. There's been a lot of spying going on, you know. Terrans creeping over the border and trying to get back with reports."

"I know," said Faylad, tortured.

"You have papers?" growled the second guard, a bull of a man with a jaw like a marble slab.

Silently Faylad produced his identity card. The thin-faced guard took it from him and scanned it carefully, moving his lips a little as he read it.

"Darrin Faylad. Identity number 17X416aa. Oh. Very sorry, sir."

Faylad was handed his card. The "X" in his identity-code designated his top-level status as an espionage agent. Under no conditions would border guards interfere with his free passage to and fro in the city.

He tried to say, *Arrest me, I'm not under my own control. Don't let me get past you.* But the words would not emerge; he forced a strangled, gargling sound past his lips, gagged, nearly choked. He coughed violently; the big guard stepped behind him and



pounded him furiously on the back, until he gasped and held up his hands.

"Are you all right, sir?" the thin one asked.

Faylad nodded. "Just—just a coughing spell. Lungs, you know." *Arrest me, you idiots! Don't let me get past! Stop me!*

"The weather's been cold," the burly guard ventured. "These night patrols are rugged."

"You haven't seen any Terran spies, have you, sir?" the thin one wanted to know.

Yes, yes, *I have!* "Sorry, Sergeant, no such luck. And now I'll have to get onward. I'm on a very important mission."

"Of course, sir. Good luck, sir."

"Thanks, Sergeant." *Arrest me!*

They grinned at him and shambled back to the warmth of their fire. Shrugging, Faylad moved past them and stepped over a tangled fence of barbed wire. Hope faded; defeat throbbed dully in him. He knew he was going to get to the border without difficulty. He cursed himself and he cursed the Earthman Calder, but cursing did no good; the thoughts rolled mockingly within his skull, while his feet carried him swiftly

on through the fire-blackened city.

THE CITY was silent, as Faylad threaded his way northward. Now the first fingers of moonlight crept into the sky, ending the siege of darkness.

The war had gone on for five years, and might go on for fifty more, or five hundred. Terra was challenged by the Empire carved out by her sons; Donnobir had been colonized by Terrans five hundred years earlier, but five hundred years is ample time for old loyalties to wither and new ones to form. A hundred planets of the galaxy were loyal to the Emperor; a hundred others still clung to the hegemony of Earth.

And here on Donnobir the two conflicting forces met, each of them occupying half a world. The border lay only a few miles to the north.

Faylad knew that he was only a small cog in the vast wheel of the war; still, it would be damaging to the Emperor's cause if the Earthmen learned of the planned sneak assault. He longed for death, for any interruption at all. But Calder had planted his command too deeply, too well.

Faylad had his last chance a mile from the border.

He was moving rapidly, dodging across the streets whenever he saw shadows, unwillingly employing all his skill in the Terran cause. He was skirting a residential section near the center of the city, heading toward Dombril Arch where he knew he could slip across the border without difficulty, when a dark shape suddenly detached itself from a pool of darkness and Faylad found himself staring into the snout of a Jekkan blaster.

"Hand over your money, pal," a thin waspish voice said.

Faylad felt simultaneous impulses of delight and contempt. The man before him was a bandit, a sneak-thief, one of many who lurked in the ruined canyons of blasted buildings and preyed on unwary passers-by. He was a small man, a worm, a parasite.

But he had a weapon. He offered death, and a release from the compulsion that gripped Faylad.

"Get out of my way," Faylad snapped.

"Hand over your money or I'll put a hole through you," the little man repeated bluntly.

Go ahead, Faylad urged silently. *Kill me!*

Out loud he said, "I'm a member of the Emperor's staff. I'm engaged on a secret mission and you're obstructing

me. Put that gun away and let me pass, citizen."

The response was a brief snort of scorn and a string of crackling obscenities. "I don't care if you're the Emperor himself, buddy. You've got about three seconds to pony up the dough and then I give it to you with the Jekkan. Slow burn, right through the gut."

Do it! Burn me down!

"All right," Faylad heard his voice saying. He tried to clamp his lips shut, but the words escaped. "Here's my money."

He drew the coins from his pocket—three gold five-magnum pieces, with the Emperor's head stamped in high relief, and five or six silver singles, as well as a few coppers. He started to hand them over.

Then, rebelling, he hurled the coins in the little bandit's face.

His plan had been to provoke an immediate blaster-shot; but his own superb reflexes, working against him, defeated the scheme. He reached out, grabbed the muzzle of the blaster, diverted it upward. A bright violet flare of energy streaked toward the roof-tops; Faylad felt the eyebrow-singeing heat.

Then he wrenched the gun from the hapless bandit and fired once, quickly. The bolt

took the little man square in the throat; he did not even have time to scream. Faylad stared bleakly at the charred hulk for a moment, his body quivering with the strain of counterpoised muscles, fighting against one another.

There was no escape.

Despite himself, he had slain the last man who could have given him release from the command of the Earther spy. He watched, almost as in a dream, as his arm rose and hurled the blaster into a gaping dark pit to his left, even before he made any attempt to use it on himself.

No hope remained. Dombril Arch lay close ahead, and in less than fifteen minutes he would be there. Pale moonlight now brightened the scene.

Faylad moved on, toward the border.

HE REACHED Dombril Arch twelve and a half minutes later; the stop-watch in his mind insisted on counting out even the seconds. The moon was higher now, and the great marble monument glinted whitely in the cold night air. Dombril Arch—a memorial to the first Emperor—was surrounded by a large park, difficult to patrol. It was here that

the flow of spies was thickest, as through a permeable membrane.

Faylad had not come here because he knew he could slip through easily, this time; his motive—or rather, the motive of the force that propelled his unwilling self—was quite the reverse. The Terrans patrolled Dombril Park heavily, even though fruitlessly; he was sure of finding someone to whom he could surrender if he crossed the border here.

The Imperial border guards intercepted him first, as he expected. He was weak with the inner tension of the struggle that had consumed him for more than an hour; he knew the futility of hoping that they would stop him, when all other hopes had failed.

He was right. They gave him a routine questioning, then demanded his papers. As soon as they saw the "X" on his identity card they knew they had no jurisdiction over his comings and goings; with exaggerated politeness they begged his pardon for having stopped him, and wished him well in his mission.

Limply he asked them, within the confines of his mind, *Why don't you shoot me? Can't you see that I'm not under my own volitional control?*

But he no longer had the

strength even to attempt to fight the compulsion; his nerves were tattered, his will frayed, his steady strength failing him.

He smiled politely and said, "Thank you for your good wishes. I will go through the park."

"That's always the best way," agreed a lieutenant of the guards. "Good luck."

Faylad nodded wearily and entered the park.

Now he made no further attempt at deception; he walked upright, not bothering to slink through the shadows, not caring if anyone saw him. He was drenched with his own sweat, limp with fatigue. The dead hand of Calder had pushed him puppetlike across half a city, and he could no longer even resist.

At the far side of the park, he saw the Terran border guards, pacing tensely back and forth, darting glances toward the Imperial quarter, looking up uneasily as if expecting a momentary breach of the truce.

They saw him come through the park and froze a moment, as if astonished that any Donnobiru should be so foolhardy as to attempt a crossing right under their noses. Faylad walked toward them, relieved at last to have arrived.

He had been hoping for one final way out: a desperate charge that would bring the Terran fire on him. But even that was impossible.

"Haic," he was ordered. "Where are you going?"

"I bear an urgent message for Major Lesperance of Terran Security," Faylad murmured, half-audibly.

"Message? Who are you?"

"My name is Darrin Faylad. I carry a message from Major Calder to Major Lesperance."

The Terrans conferred briefly, in whispered undertones. Then hands seized him roughly; he felt a weapon thrust into the small of his back.

"Come along, then. We'll take you to Lesperance and let him find out what's going on."

LESPERANCE was a bright-eyed, hawk-nosed man with close-cropped red hair, who strutted round Faylad, staring at him intensely, and finally said, "You have a message for me from Calder?"

"Yes."

"You're a Donnobiru. How come Calder picked you to send messages?"

Faylad shrugged. "You can be sure I didn't do it willingly. I was drugged."

Lesperance grinned. "Yes,

that sounds like Calder, all right. Well, let's have the message."

Faylad fought one final losing battle with himself, struggling to erect an inward barrier against the words that surged and bubbled against his clamped lips and sought to crack through the roof of his mouth.

He said, "Imperial troops are moving on Donnobir from the south and west. They intend to break the truce and attack the Terran encampments. Donnobir disarmament talk is just a smokescreen for an intended treacherous attack some time at the end of this week."

Lesperance's sharp eyes went wide with surprise. "What? Repeat that."

"No," Faylad said. He rejoiced in being able to refuse. He had fulfilled the command laid upon him by Calder; now he was once again free. He sagged wearily, like a castoff grain-sack, but he was strong with the knowledge that at least he was his own master again.

"I said repeat the message," Lesperance said slowly.

Mutely Faylad shook his head. Lesperance shrugged and nodded his head.

"Okay. I guess Calder's hoodoo is worn off. Well, we can

get it out of you with interrogation tactics. Will you tell us where Calder is?"

"No," Faylad said.

"We'll find that out too. The important thing is to get our defenses ready for this Donnobiru counterthrust," Lesperance said. He glanced at a Terran standing to his left and said crisply. "Take this man down to interrogation and pump him of everything he knows."

Hands grasped Faylad's arms roughly. He was dragged from the Major's office. As he went through the door he heard Lesperance impatiently barking, "Hello! Hello! Lesperance speaking. Get me General Scott's office and get it fast!"

SOME TIME LATER, they turned Faylad loose.

He had no idea what day it was, nor how long he had spent in the interrogation chamber. He felt no pain now. He felt oddly serene, dreamlike.

They had found out everything—that Calder was dead, that Faylad had been a Donnobiru master counterspy, that the Emperor secretly planned to break the truce and in one fierce offensive smash the unsuspecting Terran lines. They

had found out all they needed to know. They had utterly drained him.

Then they had placed a new compulsion on him.

It did not surprise him; it was a logical thing to do. He was a key figure in Donnobiru espionage. If they could insinuate him behind the Emperor's lines once again, and make use of him to funnel information to them, he would be far more valuable to the Earther cause than any number of clever Terran spies.

So they doctored him up and turned him loose at the edge of Dombriil Park. The Terran guards had been warned, and they let him past.

Bitterly and yet serene, Faylad made his way toward the South Side, toward the Emperor's territory. He had no idea how much time had passed, nor did he know what steps the Terrans had taken to drive back the secret offensive whose existence he had been forced to reveal.

All he knew was that henceforward he was to be a Terran puppet, shuttling between the lines, serving as the arch-traitor to the Emperor's cause.

He moved step after weary step toward the Imperial side of the park. At length he emerged near the great arch; it was early morning, not

much after dawn, and a group of border guards in Imperial uniform were sitting boredly on the steps of a building facing the park.

They rose and came running toward him. He did not even have the strength to resist; the Terran-implemented words came unbidden to his tongue as the guards surrounded him.

"I've just returned from a successful mission. I need transportation. I have to go to Imperial Headquarters right away, and file my report."

Guffaws greeted that statement. He heard them whispering; then someone in a corporal's uniform said, "You'll get to Headquarters, all right—on a slab, you traitor!"

"We have to be sure he's the one," said a lieutenant. "Quick, you—your identity card."

"I'm Darrin Faylad of His Imperial Majesty's Espionage Corps. Here's my card."

"He even admits it!" a sergeant said.

The lieutenant studied his card briefly a second, then pocketed it. "No doubt about it; he's the one. Sergeant, put him up against the monument and shoot him. Five thousand golden magnums for his head!"

"Wait a minute!" Faylad protested. "What's going on?"

They hustled him across to

the arch. A voice said, "You must have thought we were stupid or something, traitor. First you give secrets to the Earthmen and then you come marching back, bold as brass, to hunt for more."

"Ten thousand Imperial troops killed because of you," muttered another. "His Majesty's plans ruined."

They lined him up against the cold stone. Faylad understood. Evidently they knew he had been the one who had carried word of the secret offensive to the Earthmen; he was wanted dead or alive as a traitor to the Emperor, and these men were taking the proclamation literally.

He saw the guns lined up, and tried to call out, tried to thank them for freeing him. But the Earther compulsion was too strong even now, and he could not speak. He managed to smile, instead, as he waited calmly for the bullets that would remove him from the puppet-stage for the last time.

He had not expected to die a traitor's death—but at least now he was free from the Earther thrall. Five guns fired, and five slugs ripped into him; and in dying, Faylad thought gratefully that at least he had managed some small measure of triumph over the Earthers after all.



TOLERANCE AND THE FUTURE

"By tolerance I do not mean tolerance of evil in one's self but rather the recognition that even two people—hearing the same words, living together, and seeing the same things—have some measure of gulf between them. I mean the recognition that when we are dealing with remote peoples or remote traditions, we need to bring an overpowering humility to our estimate of what they are, and to our measure of them.

"I have the impression that if we, in this time and this age, manage properly to live with the wealth of knowledge, the wealth of change, the responsibility, and the traits of impotence which these times dish up, we will really be quite something and that perhaps there even will be people in places and times that come after who will have reason to be grateful to us."

—J. Robert Oppenheimer in
Science Perspectives



THE READERS' SPACE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of a mighty fine issue.

"The Scarlet Sun Rises" is the first choice with me this trip, because I always do like everything by Charles V. De Vet even if its his worst which he hasn't turned one out lately. I'd get more of these kind of stories by him because they really do help an already good magazine.

I'd like to say that those fans interested in getting some back issues of various magazines please write me at my present address. I've got a lot of *Astoundings* and *Amazings*. Four for \$1.00 plus postage.

I have a copy of *The Lovers*.
—James W. Ayers, 609 First Street, Attalla, Alabama.

•

The April issue of SFA was good. The cover was excellent. (Can't you get out of the rut you've put yourself in? That

is you have had a damsel on every cover of SFA so far. Now we certainly like to look at pretty gals but nuffs a nuff. On the other hand if you do put a gal on every cover of SFA you might be the first SF zine to do so ((I think)) and create all sorts of egoboo for LTS.) (*I'm afraid Planet Stories, for one, beat me to it.* —LTS) The Silverberg story "Shadow on the Stars" was certainly one of Silverberg's better yarns. Besides I like the idea of having a full length (well almost full length) novel in each issue of a SF magazine.

I've always wondered what you do with the original cover paintings that pro zines use for covers. Couldn't you give them away to somebody (hint, hint)? Perhaps you could run a contest with the cover painting each month as the prize??? I'd just love to own that painting on the

April cover. Well, anyways, could you clarify me on this vital matter?—Peter Francis Skeberdis, 606 Crapo Street, Flint 3, Michigan.

PS. Woooooie, I just realized that the gal on April cover has *pink hair*. You just don't see many of those no more.

(We buy only reproduction rights; the artist gets his original back. But we may try that contest idea sometime.—LTS)

●

As far as I can find out, your March issue was the first of your magazine to reach this neck of the woods. Anyway Mr. Destiny (is that his real name?) accused me of being asleep, I resent that, I never sleep on Saturdays, that's my reading day.

I just finished the March issue, will tally my results:

"Sykes": The best short in the issue, not a real good yarn but passable. I have a philosophy—There's no such thing as a bad science fiction story—just some are better than others.

"The Scarlet Sun Rises": This I thought was the best one in the issue.

"Vengeance of the Space Armadas": This too was a good, but will rate a second, behind De Vet. Could be be-

cause I missed the first two.

"Big Sam Was My Friend": This one will have to take a fourth, with quite a gap between it and number three. I didn't particularly care for it, oh, well, I have a phil . . .

"Destination Unknown": Hi-Yo Silver AwaaaaY! Nuff said.

I would like to see a letter column, maybe even an editorial. The departments you now have are good, the first thing I read when I buy a magazine are the editorials and letters, I guess its a leftover from the good old pulp days.

Anyway thanks for another magazine to read, for me there can't be too many, by the way tell Destiny (?) I'll take him up on his bargain about those sample fanzines.—Rog Coleman, Star Route 2 Box 700-C, Bremerton, Washington.

●

Having grabbed the latest issue of SFA off the newsstand yesterday, I've noticed that you haven't made up your mind about which features to use monthly, and which to drop.

I'm a very loyal reader of SFA, and have a complete collection of back issues. It seems you change the format almost every issue. This issue (March '58), you've dropped

the lettercol. You aren't going to leave it out are you? If you do, SFA will become boring on the feature side. Isn't there some way you can include "The Editor's Space," "The Readers' Space," and "The Fan Space" all in each issue? Maybe you could leave out one short story and have a full variety of features each issue.

By the way, I believe "Archibald Destiny" stuck his foot in his fannish mouth on page 130 of this last issue. Toward the last part of Raligh Evans' letter where Evans requested various issues of certain magazines, he had listed *Infinity*, *Galaxy*, *Unknown* (and here Uncle Arch stepped in and put *Worlds* parentheses, thereby suggesting that there was no such mag as *Unknown* but only a similar one entitled *Unknown Worlds*. This isn't quite so! There also was a mag with the title *Unknown*. Of course, this is just a technicality, but if you're going to print a guy's personal, you may as well print it the way it originally reads. *(But it did originally read that way. Lots of people refer to the late lamented fantasy magazine in that manner, since it operated under both titles during its life span.—LTS)*

Another small gripe, for which I have no grounds, is the fact that *Destiny* printed a letter I had sent him about four months ago. In this letter I had asked *him* for advice on starting a fan'zine. By now, I've already started and published two issues of my fan'zine, *Vampire*, and have acquired a co-editor, named Mike Klose. *(Destiny is a rank neo-fan, and has never published a fanzine, so printing your letter was the best he could do. And because printing and distribution take so much time, you must allow a few months before you'll see your personal in print.—LTS)*

How about getting "Emsh" to put a little more detail into his covers. His illos have always reminded me acutely of Kelly Freas', except that they are more skimpy.

Say, if you want to have the most interesting lettercol in any science fiction mag today, why don't you give a free, original copy of an illustration used in the preceding issue, to the best two or three letter writers. The old pulps, at least *Planet*, used to do this, and achieved the most readable lettercols imaginable.

It's worth a try isn't it? Or maybe a free copy of the issue in which the letter appears, to the writer? Gee, I'm

full of ingenious ideas all of a sudden. Why don't you print excerpts from my letter and send me a free copy!—Stony Barnes, Route 1, Box 1102, Grants Pass, Oregon.

Now to good old SFA. Emsh is all-powerful again, but it's still no comparison to that of *Infinity*. Say, does Emsh use a model? (Yes.—*LTS*) Just wondering, as the girl on both *Infinity* and SFA have that same sort of hypnotic gleam in their eyes. Glad to see Knox's "Vengeance of the Space Armadas" (tho you might do something about these silly titles!) as the previous one seemed as tho it were slightly thinned. This helps to thicken it out. As to the entire trilogy; if you can get more of this type, please do so. Knox has a truly nice style that is free and flowing; he tells his stories interestingly and without forcing it, yet he doesn't let his stories drag. The entire theme is nice, and if he can do more of this, please let him do so. His only mistake, as far as I can see, was in the second, in which not only was the ending thin, but he repeated himself, maybe for the sake of clarity, but with the outcome being that of boredom.

Three cheers and a hip-horrah for De Vet! His showing in *Infinity* a few issues back is nothing compared to this! His writing is a little cluttered with trivia, but the whole thing was handled excellently.

"Destination Unknown" was very good. Loved the ending, it had such a touching feel to it.

Great Gobs of GoshGolly-Geewhiz's, Ellison's "Big Sam Was My Friend" was a beautiful piece of mood fiction. It was by far one of his best, and being The Number One Harlan Ellison Fan, I've read everything I could lay my hands on of his. All of his sf, at any rate. I guess that makes me some kind of authority.

Shame on you Larry Shaw! "Sykes" was only good.

Knox is quite competent as a reviewer. Hmmm. I'll have to watch this boy and give you more comments on him later.

Now Arch mentions letter columns, so here's a gripe of mine that your readers might mull over: Most of the letters are filled to the brim with "Get stories by Heinlein, Bradbury, Merritt, Lovecraft, van Vogt . . ." etc. Now anybody should know that the editor isn't going to set down and write a letter saying,

"Dear Mr. Heinlein, One of our readers requested a story by you and I thought maybe you just might write one for us. . . ." Aside from this, I like lettercolumns (especially those of *Infinity* and SFA, to be more specific).

Now Larry, there is an author I'd like to see in *Infinity* and SFA. I'm pretty sure you can get him. I've only read a few of his stories, but from these few I'd like to see more from him. He's that guy that used to be co-editor of *If* or something. His name is Shaw. . . . (Yes indeed, a fine writer. Trouble is, he's so lazy.—LTS)

deploribus neofan for now
—rich brown, 127 roberts
street, pasadena, california.



"Shadow on the Stars" was one of the very best things you've ever run in SFA. As I've said elsewhere, Silverberg is becoming a really disciplined artist. The amazing thing is that he can do this plus the tremendous output of ordinary and downright shoddy hackwork by which he earns his bread. Bob is one of the few writers I've met who realizes that to live one has to work. He writes on two levels: one contains the gigantic amount of writing under his

own and a dozen house and pen names that keeps him alive. The other level holds such items as the best Robert Randall collaborations, the little gem that appeared in the March William, and "Slice of Life," just across the street.

In between are his novels, which range from the lower level (his first attempt) to close to the top, in stories like *Master of Life and Death*, and the one we've just been discussing. The story seemed somehow to synthesize the traditions, if not the styles, of two past masters, that, on the face of it, would seem antithetical, namely, Robert Heinlein and E.E. Smith. The the - marvelous - invention - latter's famed hero - with - destroys - gigantic -enemy - space - fleet situation, coupled with Heinlein's skill in underwritten climaxes made for one of the most unusual reading experiences I've had in some time. Here is Ewing with a time-warp generator fighting the Klodni, and then here is Ewing going home, and here is the end of the chapter. Then, oliver sudden, you realize that calm as you please this guy has just wiped out seven hundred and fifty spaceships by his own self!

Whee! This is the stuff I like.

Fine. Just a) don't sequel "Space Witch"; the odds are hundreds to one it will be up to the first, which wasn't many notches above competent itself.

b) Bury the Chalice. Deep.

c) Work on EESmith, GO-Smith, and Ed Hamilton.

d) Leave RMWilliams alone. You print him and I'll go somewhere else.

The flavor of some of the letters in SFA remind me of the old *Startling* and *TWS*. This is unfortunate. I grew up with TEV and TRS, and for a short time was one of the select letterhacks, but the style and tone of the columns seems flat without the pulp format, small type, rupture and no-smoking ads interwoven with the letters, and above all, Merwin and Mines. I guess this is one of those things that is best a fond memory. Please don't let your letter columns fall into a similar style. At best it will be a shadow.—J. MartinGraetz, 32 Fayette Street, Cambridge 39, Massachusetts.

(Beg to differ. Those ads you mention we're better off without, but I see nothing wrong with the tone. Of course, we could use more space; but all we really need is more and better letterhacks.

How about it, readers?—LTS)

For a while, I thought that SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES was back on the ball. In the past few months you had been slumping off, I'm afraid, but when I saw this issue I thought you were really back on top.

I'm afraid I was wrong.

"Shadow on the Stars" showed that Silverberg couldn't write a bad story if he tried. Unfortunately, it was almost completely lacking in originality, and Bard Ewing strikes me as more of a superman than a man. Silverberg entertained me with it, but as a story it didn't amount to much. And for once, I'd like to read a story which ended instead of demanding a sequel.

The short stories were both terrible. The endings were apparent almost from the beginning.

If it weren't for "The Editor's Space," "The Book Space," "The Fan Space" and "The Readers' Space" I'd stop buying SFA. Your stories must improve! *Infinity* is so much better!—Leslie Gerber, 201 Linden Boulevard, Brooklyn 26, New York.



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