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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. I

No. 4

1958

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

Now that the first wave of surprise and excitement over the space satellites has died down, it's possible to make some evaluations of the by-products of the news.

When the news broke, a lot of people predicted that the sales of science fiction magazines and books would increase enormously. They were dead wrong. Circulation figures have remained just about where they were before. Science fiction is still a pretty specialized field, and does not lure many readers away from other forms of entertainment.

The moral for editors of s-f magazines is obvious (and the squares should have known it before) : since you can't attract huge segments of the general public anyway, forget the superfluous gimmicks designed to do so and stick to pleasing the loyal readers.

On the other hand, such a major breakthrough couldn't fail to have some effect on the public. Confidence in science and scientists undoubtedly received a big boost, and there aren't as many people as there used to be who claim that rockets won't work because "there's nothing in space for them to push against." And the United States may even get around to spending more money on scientific research.

The word Sputnik itself has become so firmly entrenched in the language that news commentators frequently refer to the American satellites as "the American Sputniks." And headlines casually tossing about such science fictional phrases as "space war" are becoming fairly common.

Science fiction fans will always be a fairly rare breed, apparently. But at least we aren't as likely to be sneered at for reading "that crazy stuff" any more. Funny . . . wonder if we won't grow to miss that old inferiority complex?—LTS



Mission to Oblivion

John Victor Petersen works for the Civil Aviation Administration, as Chief of the Property Management Branch at New York International Airport. When he writes of future developments in radar, instrument landing systems, and similar devices, it is with the authority of long experience in this field. Though his fiction has been appearing for almost 20 years, he is strictly a "spare-time" writer—unfortunately for his many fans.

MISSION TO OBLIVION

by **JOHN VICTOR PETERSEN**

For Earthmen, Mag was a ghetto planet—with rules that were death to defy, and impossible to obey!

Illustrated by Bowman

Preface

For fifty years, Mag, the second and only habitable planet of the system of Lalande 21,185, was to impatient transient Terrans little more than a way station on their outward exploratory burst toward farther stars in the sector. To those swiftly passing explorers, eager as they were for more promising conquests, the strange regulations which governed the conduct of the Terran personnel at the two small, restricted bases on Mag were the subject of an occasional bewildered shrug. But

to those Terrans serving on Mag, each harshly discriminatory word was etched forever in the mind :

Pursuant to authority vested in me under Solar Law 2219, I, Gordon Leems, Commander, LEO (Lalande Expedition One), do hereby establish these regulations after the requisite post-contact year of exhaustive study of the conditions, law, mores and religion prevailing on Mag, Lalande, 21, 185-11 :

1. The hierarchy of the great leader Rams shall be considered absolute.

2. Such areas as the hierarchy shall designate shall be out of bounds to all Terrans, including, but not limited to, the island of Daskanerf, the surrounding Central Sea and the Dwod Peninsula.

3. There shall be no inter-racial association whatsoever except with Ramsies, and no attempt to secure by representations of friendship, by bribery, theft, force, or any means whatsoever, any knowledge not freely yielded of the spoken or written language or of the mores, history, habits, science or religion of Mag.

4. All Terran knowledge shall be revealed to Ramsies upon request and without equivocation.

5. No female Terran shall be permitted to surface on Mag unless exceeding thirty Terran years in age.

6. No Terran shall be stationed on Mag in excess of five Terran years unless physically unfit for interstellar transit.

7. A single violation of these articles shall result in (a) return of the violator to Terra if physically fit or (b) imprisonment at hard labour for not less than ten Terran years.

8. Multiple violations shall be punishable by memory erasure or death, as a Terran General Court may direct.

The regulations existed for fifty years without historical record of their reason for being. When they were suddenly abolished, the Galactic Historians failed to record anything but the fact of abolition.

But there *is* a record, drawn from the recollections of some of those men and, for the greater part, from the diary of the most burningly inquisitive of them all.

This is that record.

It begins, appropriately, in an hour of darkness.

Chapter 1

When Hill Barris first heard the erratic, distant thunder from the fogbound Maggian night, he dismissed it as that of another atmosphere ship approaching Bebryan Spaceport from distant Dwod. Surely others were coming from Terran Base Headquarters at the Maggian Capital to meet the passengers who would surface in shuttles from the nearly-due starship *Star of Kenya*. A throng invariably came to greet newcomers out of Terra for firsthand accounts of home.

Barris sat alone in the ready room for communications personnel at the Bebryan Spaceport Tower, holding and bleakly viewing his diary. He recalled a thousand other nights here or at Dwod when he had searched for words no one save himself would ever read. How often had he asked Silvy Ward, the Terran Base Administrator, or Hyman Modlin, the Surgeon General, to burn the diary unread upon his death and to throw its ashes into the East with his own?

Hill Barris had been on Mag for ten years and for ten years he had fought lurking death within himself while those physically fit had come, served their duty tours and thankfully gone home. They seldom returned.

Thank God that Julian Ortiz was coming back! Julian would have word of Valinda—

He found it difficult to remember Val's features. He had seen her last at the Sands in New Mexico just before he'd enshuttled for the orbiting starship. Her face had been distorted then with the tears, her fine body, blossoming into full womanhood, trembling against him.

He strained to see her face in memory but another face came between—that of the lovely Maggian girl who had helped care for him after he had been stricken. He remembered the Maggian girl's slender fingers caressing his temples in the height of his strange illness, her warm voice speaking liquid words which were so soothing but which he did not understand. And he remembered with growing warmth that magic night before he'd been released for duty—

No, no! He must forget. She, too, was lost to him. Forever lost, as Val was.

It was then that he recognized the growing sound out of the night. He had only heard that intermittently pulsing-spitting blast once before: as a child on Terra when a starship returning from sterile Sirius, wracked in translation from hyper-space, had whirled uncontrollably to its doom on the Mojave Desert.

This had to be the *Star of Kenya* ! She was the only starship due. Oh, God ! She was almost certainly doomed ! She, as all starships, had been built aspace near Luna's orbit. She had never touched an atmosphere, never would except in direst emergency. She had no airfoils, vanes or chutes. Only expert blast juggling and utmost co-ordination between pilot and ground-controlled tractor beams could surface her safely.

A visifone buzzed. As he responded he viewed the strained face of Roger Sullivan, the Spaceport Tower Chief.

"Hiil, the *Kenya* translated too close to the star. Her ray shields collapsed. All aboard were badly exposed before they hyperjumped to Mag's orbit. They decided to surface; waiting for shuttles would have meant death to most aboard. We need a magnetonar expert in case the tractors malfunction. If we get the *Kenya* in we'll need every available atmosphere ship to get the injured over to Dwod General Hospital. You're the expert and you've got a heli, so come on, Hill !"

"Coming, Sully. Out !"

He pocketed his diary, forgetting his brief case, his mind filled with the blazing thought that Julian Ortiz might be among those dying.

Could the magnetonar tractor beams stabilize the unwieldy dumbbell-shaped starship in a rigid descent cone ? True, they wove the unusually strong magnetic lines of force which banded Mag into a temporary funnel—but was the reactor's output adequate to sustain the weight and thrust of a Mark XXII starship ?

He bounded up the stairs to the tower. His eyes flashed to the radarscopes and caught the *Kenya's* unstable, revolving approach. He glanced at the meter bank. The tractor beams were holding—but the spinning ship's blips were strengthening too quickly !

"Brake descent ! Counterblast !" Sullivan screamed into a microphone.

Cursing, they threw their eyes upward to the transparent dome.

The rolling pinkish-purple flare of belatedly applied atomic counterblasts lighted the fog then and, unseen to them, the spinning starship screechingly ground its twin spheres into the hard surface of the port.

"God !" Barris cried, his face drained of colour.

"There's a twin hull," Sullivan said. "I hope it stood up under that!"

The rumbling roar of decontamination tugs came then from below. They'd certainly need decons to bring the *Kenya's* people in. The spaceport was *hot*. The *Kenya* had poured out more radiation in her final blasting than any unshielded human could possibly endure.

Barris went wordlessly to the elevator and dropped to Customs' quarantine room. The room, hopelessly inadequate for so great an emergency, held only a doctor, three aid men, three Health Instrument men—and a Ramsi.

The Ramsi caught Barris' instant attention. He was taller than any other Barris had seen and clad in a flowing blue robe of a deeper hue than most. His cowl was down, revealing silky golden hair. A curly, golden beard softened the strong features of an almost godlike face.

The Ramsi's eyes locked with his disconcertingly.

Unquestionably the Ramsi's strong features bore a family resemblance to the delicate features of the slender native girl he once had known. He was on the point of ignoring regulations and asking of her when a decon tug clamped noisily upon a quarantine lock.

The Health Instrument men quickly manoeuvred shielding around the lock's gaping aperture and into the decon's snout. Aid men began emerging with stretcher cases.

Barris stood watching, his thin face twisted, forgetful of the Ramsi. This was how it had been with him ten years before. Twenty-one then, fresh out of Stellar Technological Institute, burning for the stars. A kid who had through chance been bunked near a defective shielding plate when that other starship's navigator had misjudged the translation point from hyperspace and come through too close to the system's primary. He, too, had absorbed Lalande's savage rays, going into convulsion and coma. Luckily they'd shuttled him down quickly to Dwod General Hospital—in time to save for him at least a half-life.

Julian! They were carrying Julian Ortiz forth on a stretcher, his dark face puffed and blistered. He was limp, a sure indication of life—

"I know him," Barris said thickly to the doctor. "I've a helijet and can take him and another to Dwod."

"We must be systematic!" the doctor snapped.

"He's a personal friend. I'm Barris, Chief of Planetary Facilities. He's Ortiz, our chief patrol pilot."

"All right!" the doctor said with sudden deference.

Barris found the golden bearded Ramsi beside him.

"There's another of your boys here," the Ramsi said, his voice deep, strangely soothing. "One Arthur Ashley—"

But as the Ramsi was speaking, Barris observed the short, barrel-chested Chief of Terran Base Security Police—Joseph Dargo—enter a far door and stand, surveying the room with dark, slumbrous eyes, his completely hairless face inscrutable. With Dargo watching, one could not be overly cautious. Anything vaguely resembling fraternization could easily be interpreted as a direct violation of the regulations and Dargo's enforcement of them was ruthless.

"Your interest amazes me," Barris snapped.

Shrugging, the Ramsi turned to the doctor. "May I suggest, Doctor Kaufman, that the ambulance craft cut across the Central Sea? The protective field over the island of Daskanerf will be reduced to a ten mile perimeter to permit a direct route to Dwod during the emergency."

"Then—" Barris started, and paused as the Ramsi turned toward him, palms upraised.

"Delay and death run on the same time track," the Ramsi said. "Your own time is running on the track of delay—"

My own time, Barris thought. Oh, God! He did not have the brief-case containing the medicines and food concentrates without which he could not hope long to live. But he couldn't go back for it now. There just wasn't time. There was Julian to think of—and Ashley. He had to take the chance that nothing would happen. He *had* to!

He turned quickly to an aid man.

"Bring these two to my ship," he said.

He looked back briefly as he followed the stretcher bearers into the hangar, wondering fleetingly how the watching Ramsi had come to address him so familiarly, and wondering what lurked behind Joseph Dargo's inscrutable gaze.

Chapter 2

The stretchered men were quickly placed in Barris' helijet. He taxied from the hangar and, cleared by Bebryan Tower, blasted the ship up through the befogged night on madly spinning vanes.

He levelled off in the eternal murk at five thousand feet, set the autopilot on the magnetonar omnirange frequency, opened the atomics wide and retracted the vanes. The flight chart showed his nose dead on the Mount Murro omnirange ; he'd stick to that guiding navigation aid and then follow others up around the eight-thousand-mile curve of the Centrai Sea on the coastal airway to Dwod.

But wait ! The Ramsi had announced that the supposedly impenetrable electromagnetic field around the forbidden island of Daskanerf would be drawn in. Curious ! That was the first time Barris had heard a positive statement that the field was controllable.

Julian Ortiz had been flight-checking facilities along the airway some months before a family crisis had called him back to Terra and had flaunted the regulations to skirt the edges of the field. Julian had told him in utmost secrecy afterwards that everything electronic in the patrol ship had malfunctioned and it was only by the grace of a greater god than Rams, as Julian put it, that his ship had been on a course that took it back out of the field without his guidance.

Barris had thought, without a basis for his conclusion, that the field was natural ; the Ramsi's statement could be construed to mean it was not.

Could he—dared he—believe the Ramsi had been sincere ? It would save an hour if he could take an airline course, striking from Mount Murro straight across the Central Sea to Dwod.

He would—and damn Joseph Dargo if he called it a violation !

He was sick and tired of Mag anyway. If a violation were recorded against him, though, it would mean ten years at hard labour—

He would decide when he reached Mount Murro.

His mind fled to the Maggian girl. He had never known her name. They had known no common tongue, only a great natural attraction that was a flame still in his memory. If only the regulations had permitted their marriage—but the question could never be asked, for the morning after their secret rendezvous she had vanished from Dwod General Hospital. He had never seen or heard of her again. He had never even inquired for her ; that might have made Dargo suspicious.

Dargo was an enigma. There was no precise record of his birth, his father being listed as Philip Dargo of LEO, his

mother's name curiously omitted. Rumor said Dargo's mother had been a Maggian but Dargo claimed complete Terran ancestry. It was generally accepted that Dargo had been born on Mag just before Leems issued the regulations and allowed to remain because the regulations simply did not cover people of Terran ancestry conceived on Mag.

Dargo's sullen features, hairless as the adult Maggian men except the Ramsies, was again in Barris' mind. If anti-social, ruthless Dargo were indeed the result of Terran-Maggian inter-marriage, could Barris have married a Maggian without wondering what the union might produce?

Barris had tried to forget the Maggian girl, had sought through his diary to concentrate his lost dream on Val, whose age would bar her from Mag for a long, long time—long enough for her to forget that he had ever been. And Julian Ortiz would have made it final now. He could trust Julian to have painted a sordid picture of one Hill Barris gone native, a worthless degenerate.

But—would he ever know if Julian had succeeded?

He turned sharply to survey his unconscious friend and the young newcomer, Ashley. Immediately he recognized that they were in the final stages of coma. He knew that to follow the long curve of the airway would mean certain death to them.

Unhesitatingly he cut the autopilot, heading directly east. There! They would pass ten miles north of Daskanerf, well outside the perimeter the Ramsi had mentioned.

Moments later he saw the visual fringes of the field, first as a convoluted smoky black arch fluttering in the swirling obscurity; then suddenly flinging crimson streamers toward the veiled stars—streamers that turned, auroralike, to violet and yellow and green—

Even for Mag with its strange electromagnetic manifestations, a natural aurora could not exist so near the surface. And there was a rhythmic pulse in this display that spelled electronic manipulation—a definite polarization of transmitted magnetonar microwaves—to an electronics engineer such as he who had frequently spent endless hours at the scope of polarstatic indicator.

Magnetonar was an outgrowth of radio and radar, a superior communications system the early Terrans on Mag had developed to combat the great constant humidity and electromagnetic flux. It made accurate communication

possible through polarization of microwaves and application of electronic filters.

He realized then that the Ramsies must have studied magnetonar (certainly it, as all Terran science, was available to them under the regulations !) and created a similarly polarized field over Daskanerf. That *must* be the answer !

His eyes went to his compass. He found that he had without conscious thought turned squarely into the field—toward Daskanerf !

He started to change the heading ; then vast trembling and great sweating nearly convulsed him. He fumbled behind the seat for his brief case ; then realized, aghast, that the food concentrates needed to raise his dangerously low blood sugar level were back at Bebryan Tower !

He had to—*had* to change the heading ! He strained forward to the controls ; then realized that the instruments were completely erratic, unreadable. He was caught in the field of Daskanerf. They were lost ! And he was going helplessly into shock !

The autopilot— No ! That was electronic ; it wouldn't function.

There was but one chance : the mechanical gyrolanding device *might* surface the ship somewhere on Daskanerf.

He reached out his thin, palsied right hand, snapping on the device—and fell back. The diminishing screech of automatically smothered atomics was a fugitive banshee in his oblivion.

Chapter III

Sometime, somewhere, his mind came swimming up out of darkness and there was light.

Blinding light in a white aseptic room and a golden-bearded Ramsi smiling down at him gently, a hypodermic syringe poised in gloved hands—

And there was darkness—

Awareness came again—briefly, dimly—came and went and came again and he lay in unseen mire in dense darkness. Fog swirled palpably about him. He was cold, wet, shudderingly weak.

He explored the darkness with trembling, cautious hands, encountering nothing but sloshy mud. He laughed shakily, senselessly, lost, lonely, a little mad.

"Hill !"

Not Julian's voice ! It can't be ! He's dead—dead. . . .

He felt groping hands.

"Julian, is that you ?"

"Yes, Hill, Ashley and I are here."

But they couldn't be. They had been in coma, dying. . .

"Hill," Julian said, "buck up ; we've got to get into the fan marker building."

"Fan marker ?" Barris asked perplexedly.

"Yes. And fast—the dawn flood fog's coming in. You know what *that* brings ! Come ; It's this way."

Lurching. Feet dragging in the mire. Knees weak.

The fog *was* brightening.

Suddenly before him was the intricate latticework of a marker counterpoise and, above, the disc-cone radiators for which it formed a stable ground. The pattern of it was familiar. . . . Yes, it was an experimental facility he had personally designed and installed, located on the Central Sea's eastern shore only ten miles from Dwod. *How—how had they come to be here ?*

He halted, wavering, groping uncertainly for the door's dialock.

"Damn it !" burst a young man's voice—Ashley's, Barris realized. "Something slashed my ear !"

The wind-driven fog had turned to frothy sheets of palpable whiteness. There were flitting butterflylike blacknesses in it, the hungry razor-piranhas which swarmed in Mag's flood fogs.

Frantically Barris spun the dialock, thankful that he recalled the combination. *There !*

The door burst suddenly outward with an escaping blaze of automatic light. They shoved into the single room, Ortiz skipping agilely around the transmitters as Barris and Ashley were pinned immovably against the equipment by the swiftly closing door. The building was designed to admit one and swiftly close against Mag's equipment-destroying humidity.

They were silent, thankful beyond speech that they had all managed to enter and escape the devouring razorpiranhas which scratched futilely now against the durasteel shelter.

They drank in the efficient humming of the transmitter, sending its signal out to the disc-cone radiators. These sent a field pattern vertically upward in a vast fanshape which would intersect the course of any atmosphere ship approaching from

Bebryan and automatically warn the pilot he was nearing the descent cone for space shuttles into Dwod and should hold, circling, over the marker until Dwod Tower cleared him in to surface. They knew that here was the means for them to contact any ship passing overhead and relay a call to Dwod.

Barris realized that Julian Ortiz was regarding him as though about to speak but hesitant.

"What's on your mind, Julian?" he asked.

"I don't know whether I should tell you, Hill, but you'll have to know sometime. Hill, Valinda was on the *Kenya*!"

The words burned into Barris' brain, burned and twisted amid the memories of the Bebryan Tower Chief saying that all aboard had been badly exposed, of the *Kenya's* dumbbell-shape grinding itself resoundingly against surface.

"Is she—" he started. "Oh, God, *you* couldn't know—"

"I'm sorry, Hill. But I can tell you that when we translated from hyperspace she—well, nearly everyone—was under sedation; most people don't care to face the pain of translation. Luckily a few of us chose to endure it and were conscious to carry Val and the others to safety. I don't *think* she was badly exposed; her cabin wasn't directly sunside when we broke through and you can be sure that I saw to it that she was the first I helped carry into the heavily shielded emergency quarters."

"Thanks, Julian, thanks—"

Ortiz went on to say that he'd briefly seen a Ramsi here near the fan marker, a Ramsi carrying clothing, he thought, but Barris only half heard.

Val had been on the *Kenya*, might now be dying or—dead! She should never have come across those two and a half parsecs from Terra, should never have dared the transit to see the half-man that he was.

He fumbled shakily for the diary which had so long been Val to him. It was gone! Somewhere between his black-out in the helijet and now he had lost the book or—and the thought unaccountably came and nagged—it had been taken from him.

"She should never have come," he said thickly. "You failed, Julian, failed," he accused.

His mind wandered into irrationality, tumbling back nearly ten years to the forbidden rendezvous with the Maggian girl. He was with her again and her lips were ardently fluttering against his own and he was swearing that he would take her to

himself not just for now but until the time came (rumours of the religion of Rams said), to her as it did to every Maggian girl, to hide behind thick veils and high walls and never again be seen by Terrans—

“Hill, snap out of it!”

He came back to reality with considerable effort, realizing that he wasn't co-ordinating properly, that he felt sensations within his body that he had never felt before even at the height of his illness.

Suddenly he recalled that brief waking moment in the white aseptic room, the golden-bearded Ramsi—the same one, he was sure, who had been at Bebryan—

Full realization came to him as he viewed the alert dark face of Julian Ortiz, as he turned his head to see young Ashley surveying him curiously.

“My God!” he burst. “Do you two realize that you came off the *Kenya* in coma and badly burned? The *Kenya* translated too close to this system's sun just as the ship did that I was on when I came here ten years ago. Exposure to Lalande's rays plays hell with the pancreas, creating an almost completely uncontrollable combination of hyper-insulinism and diabetes mellitus. I was hospitalized for seven months before I became competent to recognize suddenly approaching shock or coma and to self-administer glucose or insulin. I've been living close to death ever since!

“You were brought off the *Kenya* in as bad shape as I was at first but now—” He glanced quickly at his chronometer. “—now, only thirty hours later, you appear remarkably well. You couldn't recover without treatment. And Terran medicines could not give such results in any event.”

“We've been on Daskanerf and been treated by a Ramsi with miracle medicines our own science hasn't dreamed of. That medication worked wonders on you two. What it's doing to me right now only God knows!

“But, fellows, we can't tell them this at Dwod. Accidental or not, penetration of the field of Daskanerf is a direct violation of the regulations. If Joseph Dargo learned that we not only penetrated the field but actually landed on the island, I'm afraid that the phrase ‘multiple violations of sanctity’ would go on a list of charges against every one of us!”

He felt himself going suddenly unutterably weak, felt a great sweating bursting from his every pore. He knew he was going into shock again.

"Julian," he cried hoarsely, urgently, "relay a call to Dwod Tower. Tell them we crashed and are stuck here."

He was blacking out, sagging against the transmitters. Dimly he heard Ashley say, "That doesn't add. The doctors will only have to take one look—"

"If you'd been on Mag as long as—" Julian was saying. Barris heard no more.

Chapter IV

He woke once—or so dreamt—to a great sense of personal danger. In semi-darkness he dimly beheld a large figure looming over him—a Ramsi with pointed black beard and jet black robes. Light glinted on a charged hypodermic syringe. In the dark, twisted face Barris saw only menace. He screamed in panic and the sinister figure abruptly fled into nothingness—

Full awareness returned in daylight, and the darkness and fear went from his mind as his eyes opened. He had most certainly dreamed.

He realized that he was comfortably abed in a private room at Dwod General Hospital, and recognized with mounting amazement a greater sense of well-being than he had felt in years.

He heard footsteps, turned toward the doorway and cried, "Doc Modlin! What hap—"

Modlin cut him off, regarding him searchingly.

"I should be asking that, Hill. You've been in shock for two days. We've been forced to feed you glucose incessantly; your blood sugar was persistently and dangerously low. But it's been normal now for thirteen hours. Although the lab techs will have to run other tolerance tests, I believe you're *completely cured!*"

Barris swallowed hard. Thankfulness for what a Ramsi had apparently accomplished overwhelmed him.

"Well," Modlin said, "how *do* you account for it?"

Barris hesitated. Hyman Modlin was an old and great friend, but dared he admit to the doctor what could be construed as a violation of sanctity? A single violation of record meant immediate return to Terra for a healthy man—return under armed guard in disgrace. And—*what of Val?*

"Doc, is there a Terran woman here named Valinda Hathaway?"

"There has been," Modlin said gently, "but not as a patient. She fortunately suffered no ill effects on the *Kenya*."

"Thank God!" Barris said fervently.

"I wish I could say the same for all who were aboard. Of the two hundred, twenty-seven were dead when brought off. There are forty-three here and, well, Hill, they're in about the same condition as the records show you were ten years ago."

"Ortiz and Ashley?"

"Comparatively mild cases, but enough to keep them on Mag forever. But, Hill, Max Kaufman was at Bebryan and from what he said Ashley and Ortiz should be as seriously affected as—"

"I know," Barris cut in. "Look, doc, I *must* see Ortiz and Ashley!"

"Then you won't tell me now?"

"Perhaps after I've talked with them."

"Well, I'd rather you remained in bed. I'll send them in. You need rest; you suffered exposure as well as shock. And you've got to look your shining best, since Valinda Hathaway said she'll be in at two."

And Modlin went out.

The phrase, *you can't go home again*, crossed Hill Barris' mind. It didn't apply to him any longer, but it did to Julian Ortiz and Arthur Ashley—and to forty-three others doomed to be half-men as he had been unless the Ramsies were willing to treat them—or could be *forced* to do so. Oh, damn the regulations!

Ortiz and Ashley came in.

"Hi, lucky!" Ortiz said. "And you're the guy who thought *we* were cured!"

"You *will* be," Barris said almost savagely. "And, look, Julian, I'm sorry if I was nasty to you about Val's coming."

"Forget it. Honestly, I tried to persuade her *not* to, but you know Val; you just can't lie to her and she can be damnably stubborn and, further, she knew I could cut through the red tape and get her passage."

"By Heaven, I almost forgot that Val's under thirty! Julian, they can't prove that, can they?"

"Not unless Customs did some fast verifying with Vital Statistics before the *Kenya* translated from Terra. All the documents Val's carrying are in order."

"Well, let's hope they didn't check," Barris said. "If so, Val may make a quick round-trip!"

Ashley cut in, "Say, what's wrong on this crazy planet? These regulations everyone follows—how can any self-respecting Terran abide by them? We're a free people everywhere else we've been in the entire universe except here."

"Well, you know the Stellar Exploratory Code," Ortiz said. "Article One says the commander of the first expedition to any star system shall personally prescribe the regulations which shall thenceforth govern the conduct of any Terrans visiting the system. Leems apparently determined that the Maggians and their culture should remain inviolate as the Ramsies wished and for just as long as the Ramsies wished. It's as simple as that!"

"I wonder," Barris mused. "There are no records of what transpired that first year. No, I'll take that back. There is one datum—the record of Joseph Dargo's birth, something less than a year after the landing. Maybe it means nothing. Dargo's father's name is on the record; his mother's is not. That omission could have been deliberate. Was his mother a Maggian? Is there something sexually or biologically strange on this world which Leems felt should be buried forever beneath a set of incredibly discriminatory regulations? There's—"

He stopped abruptly, staring at the open doorway, refusing to believe his eyes.

"What's the matter?" Ortiz asked.

"A Ramsi—a black-bearded one with black robes—went by. The same one I dreamt about—"

"Dreamt about?" Ashley echoed.

Barris told them of the dream.

"Are you sure you dreamt it?" Ortiz asked.

"You didn't," Ashley said. "There's a hypo under your bed. The Ramsi must have dropped it when you yelled."

"There *is*?" Barris cried. "Well, get it—"

"Shush," Ortiz said. "Someone's coming—"

It was Doctor Modlin.

He asked sharply, "Has Valinda been here?"

"Why, no!" Barris said. "You said she'd come at two. It's not—"

"She came early," Modlin cut in. "She was most upset, said she had to see you urgently. I sent her up. Are you sure she hasn't been here, Hill?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why?"

"Dargo called just now and wants her seized and held incommunicado. Multiple offences, he said. Underage for landing, masquerading as a native woman and entering the native quarter of Dwod. We've got to find her and work out something to mitigate the offenses. Ridiculous as it may seem, she could be condemned to death!"

"Well, let's find her!" Barris cried.

Modlin turned toward the visifone and called the desk.

"One Valinda Hathaway entered ten minutes ago. Check all rooms for her immediately through viseye and follow up with an immediate physical check of viseye-occluded areas if viseye's negative."

Barris cut in, "Check for a Ramsi, too, doc!"

"Also for a Ramsi," Modlin echoed, snapping off when the desk acknowledged.

He turned and regarded Barris silently, his lips pursed.

The visifone buzzed and Modlin responded. He snapped it off after a moment and turned to them in bafflement.

"There are no non-patients present, Terran or Ramsi," he said. "At least not within range of the viseye pickups. They're running a room by room check. We may find Val but as far as a Ramsi's concerned, the desk says none has been here for three days."

"But I saw one not five minutes ago!" Barris said forcefully. "I'll swear it, doc! He went from right to left, toward the escalator from the lobby. It must have been just about the time you say you sent Val up."

"Then there's only one place they could be," Modlin said. "The library's the only room between here and the escalator. There's no viseye pickup in there."

Barris swung from the bed and they all hurried down the hall to the library door. It was locked but Modlin spun the diallock combination expertly and they pushed inside, each rushing to a narrow aisle. Their search was fruitless.

"What's that?" Ashley suddenly asked, pointing to the room's eastern wall.

Barris turned to the familiar sight of a Ramsi prayer plaque mounted shoulder high—a spread of white angel wings with an opalescent bubble in the centre.

"The Ramsies have them mounted in lounges and libraries throughout our installation," Dr. Modlin explained. "Their

religion calls for prayers at regular intervals and they were granted permission long before our time here to mount them where they could temporarily find seclusion."

"Is there another door to this room?" Ashley asked.

"No," Modlin answered. "And there's no window either. There's only one means of ingress and egress—the door."

"Then it's impossible," Ashley said.

Barris was eyeing the prayer plaque. He had heard rumours—you heard so many on Mag—of Ramsies seen at Dwod by patrol pilots departing for Bebryan and being at Bebryan when the same pilots arrived. He'd never given much credence to their tales. Now, however, he recalled the fact that the golden-bearded Ramsi whom he had seen at Bebryan had treated him on Daskanerf, undoubtedly shortly after the helijet had made its automatic landing there, and the fact that a Ramsi had somehow transported Ashley, Ortiz and himself from Daskanerf to the fan marker near Dwod.

And—of course! There was a little Ramsi shrine near the fan marker with a prayer plaque such as this.

Suddenly it added. The Ramsies had no atmosphere ships of their own. They had no surface ships plying the monster-thronged Central Sea. They had to have some means of transportation to and from Daskanerf.

The prayer plaques must tie into that transportation!

"Doc," Barris said, "may I call headquarters? We've got to bring Silvy Ward in on this. He's the Base Administrator, sure, but he's a wonderful guy and a close friend of mine. He's sworn to uphold the regulations but this situation has reached a point where I think even he will say the regulations be damned!"

Modlin nodded and Barris sat at the visifone. Barris paused before using the instrument, saying, "Doc, there is a hypo under the bed in my room. Will you check it, please?"

Barris had finished the call when the doctor returned, features blanched.

"Hill, where did it come from? It contained the Maggian drug *menlethicin*—which has been used since Leems' time to induce permanent and total amnesia in those with multiple violations proven against them!"

"I suspected something like that," Barris murmured.

"But how did the hypo get there?"

"I'm sorry," Barris said, "but you'll have to wait, doc, until Silvy comes."

Chapter V

Ten minutes later Henry "Silvy" Ward entered. Tall, well built, perfectly poised, he radiated an infectious confidence.

He placed a square black box on the library conference table with infinite care and extended a strong hand to Barris.

"Glad you're cured, Hill; Hy Modlin told me. Now, I'm not sure why you want the magnelectrograph, but guard it with your life. It's been in the depot safe since every other one of its kind on Mag vanished two years ago. Chuck Wilson—our shop manager, Ashley—damned near wouldn't let *me* have it!"

Ward paused looking at them one by one.

"What's wrong, fellows? You look as if the world were about to end!" he said, raising his right hand to smooth back the prematurely silvery hair at his temples which had earned him his nickname.

"This is in strictest confidence, Silvy," Barris said, regarding Ward searchingly. "It may be a frank admission of multiple violations. The life of an awful lot of Terrans may be at stake. One—a Terran woman—has been abducted. Will it be kept in confidence?"

"You've got my word, Hill."

Barris told everything that had occurred since the *Kenya's* crash landing at Bebryan Spaceport.

Ward stared down at his clenched hands for a long time; then said, "You're right, Hill; it's time for us to take positive action in spite of our oath to uphold the regulations.

"As Administrator I've had access to many secret documents, records which previous administrators had kept and passed down without Joseph Dargo's knowledge. They're incomplete, but I'll give you what I have for what it's worth.

"When I came here from Terra and found this planet a repair base and little more, a way station where strangers condescended I might eat and sleep and work if I minded my own business and stayed within the bounds of the two Terran bases and the one airway, I didn't think it was too strange.

"I had come to the only place where there was a humanoid race that would at that time begin to associate with us. I felt I must respect the fact that there are others in creation, others who had been supposedly, thoroughly investigated by a man whom galactic history names as a great leader, others whom he had decreed should remain inviolate.

"Oh, I've often wondered why and then stopped wondering, telling myself Leems must have done the proper thing for the welfare of Terrans.

"Rams was alive at the time of LEO. So was Morga, who is now leader of the Ramsies. He must be fairly ancient, though he certainly doesn't look it. An arrogant creature. As far as I know, he's the only Ramsi with black hair. Sports a pointed beard and wears black robes ; all others I've seen are blond and wear royal blue."

Barris cut in, "Then that must have been Morga who was here !"

Ward nodded. "He and Rams must have persuaded Leems that peaceful continuance of the hierarchy could only be achieved through non-contact between their worshippers and Terrans.

"Leems was all-powerful with the Stellar Exploratory Code behind him. What he dictated would remain law until good and sufficient reasons arose to change it. And, if you know the Terran High Council, 'good and sufficient reasons' means incontrovertible proof that Terran citizens are suffering extremely !

"When the regulations were issued, the Centaurians had rejected us as primitives unfit for association. At least here we'd gained a way station for farther stars. That's important when you're limited to five parsecs by the hyperspace drive.

"Certainly we've given the Ramsies the full benefit of our science. All I can say is that it's just as well that we have ; otherwise they'd have stolen it !"

Barris exclaimed.

"Surprises you, doesn't it ?" Ward asked. "Well, previous administrators decided to keep certain equipment that came into the depot secret and in every instance that equipment vanished from the depot even though it was locked and closely guarded !

"You wondered at their transportation, Hill. It's obvious to me that they've some means of moving themselves and things around that far surpasses our atmosphere ships *and* hyperspace drive. And, fellows, there's a prayer plaque in the depot !

"So where does it bring us ? Right up against the wall of the regulations !"

"But, Mr. Ward," Ashley said, "there were a dozen Terran High Councilmen on the *Kenya*. Most of them are

well. They should be sympathetic."

"I'm sure they would be," Ward said. "And they'd be glad to take their recommendations back to Terra ! This calls for action *now*, not six months from now when the Council meets again !"

"Look," Barris said, "why don't we simply invade their holy of holies—Daskanerf ? An old map I saw here shows it mostly to be a vast, level plain. My helijet apparently landed there without crashing ; the three of us couldn't have been hurt badly in the landing. I'm sure the field over Daskanerf is so polarized as to disrupt our communications. I'm also sure that we can counter it and take an ordinary atmosphere ship in for a landing."

"I can't give you my official sanction," Ward said slowly. "But, Hill, don't you think I suspect what you have in mind ? This magnelectograph I brought is the only one left here—the others vanished from the depot as I said. They were unquestionably stolen by Ramsies so that the field of Daskanerf couldn't be tested."

"You're free to use any equipment you'll need. In your own official capacities you've free access to the depot and shops. I'm with you to the limit unofficially, and if you get into trouble I'll do everything I can officially to get you out of it !

"But, Hill, I still can't see how you can get to Daskanerf ! Airborne radar won't do it ; you know we've never been able to make it work here."

"How about an instrument landing system ?" Barris asked.

Ward's eyebrows went up. "But how would you get an I.L.S. on Daskanerf without flying a ship in first—which, without airborne radar, is impossible to begin with ?"

Barris pointed to the prayer plaque on the library wall. "There's your answer," he said. "Chuck Wilson must have decontamination tugs in the depot ; they're overhauled regularly. Load a pair of them with suitable I.L.S. equipment. Veil them in mystery. Toss out the bait and equate, my friend, and we're on Daskanerf."

"Silvy, you've got to arrange a flight to show the Councilmen and some Ramsies the efficacy of our omnirange system and the need for extending the airway. Then if Julian can pilot the ship and bring it to Daskanerf, we may be able to force the Ramsies to release Val unharmed and to cure these suffering men from the *Kenya*."

He turned to Modlin. "Doc, I must be released from the hospital immediately." He turned back. "Silvy, I'm taking your vehicle ; you can easily call another. I'm going out on the Dwod Peninsula and I'm going alone ; it's better that way. I've got to measure the field of Daskanerf or we'll never be able to adapt an instrument landing system to penetrate it. And I want all of you to get out of this room and to stay out. Keep it locked. It's dangerous !"

He picked up the magnelectograph. "So long, fellows," he said, and left.

It was a wild plan, he knew—but it had to work !

Chapter VI

The eternal fog was soup-thick on the coastal road and he was thankful for the vehicle's infra-reds. He drove at top speed and reached the base of the peninsula in record time. Driving the vehicle off the road, he secreted it in the fern forest and dismounted, hiking the magnelectograph up on his shoulder.

He moved forward now through light surface mist with the thick fog hanging but feet above his head. Light, head-high ferns brushed at him wetly, silkily.

He had gone less than half a mile when he suddenly found a featureless wall confronting him. He stared upward. Ten feet of glistening wet surface met his gaze and shiftings of the fog layer showed it went even higher, how much higher he could not guess.

He had never known there was a barrier here on the peninsula—but then no Terran could have known. To his knowledge, no Terran had ever dared to come here before.

Shrugging, he turned right and went north. He had proceeded scarcely a dozen yards when he was arrested by the sight of a prayer plaque on the adamantine wall.

Why should a prayer plaque be located here in the middle of nowhere ?

He shrugged again, perplexed, and continued on with waning confidence, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder.

A hissing, threshing thunder crescendoed from the obscurity ahead.

He paused on the verge of a dishearteningly sheer cliff. It was impossible to look upon the sea, for another fog blanket of unknown thickness lay upon it. The sea was audibly alive with the movements and ululations of unseen leviathans, survivors of a paleozoic which must have made that of Mother Earth tame indeed by comparison. He shuddered, turned, and retraced his steps along the frowning wall.

Suddenly he paused in amazement. A door had opened inward in the wall, the prayer plaque he had seen proving now to be in its centre. There had been no slightest sign of an opening when he had paused here before !

Unease gripped him and he strained his eyes through the eastward arc of fronded fern and swirling fog. He detected no movement.

Hesitatingly he went on through the portal, paused and surveyed this other silent arc of fog and wet green fern. Nothing came to his ears save dripping sounds from the drenched vegetation.

A slight whisper of sound came from behind him. He whirled around. The portal had closed.

Fear swept him then. He was cut off on the wall's westward side ! Nervously he darted glances at the thicker fern growths, certain there must be lurking forms behind them ; then his eyes went back to the wall. There was a prayer plaque on this side of the portal also. His gaze was held by it almost as though a hypnotic spell were being cast from it.

He approached the wall, noting now the faintest line tracing out the portal's frame. There seemed to be no way whatsoever of opening the door.

His eyes went back to the plaque. There seemed to be a swirling of colour in the opalescent bubble at its centre. As he watched it the fear seemed to ebb and his confidence to return.

Suddenly then he turned westward with high resolve and, hiking the magnelectrograph higher on his shoulder, stepped forward at a quick pace. He had gone a mile without incident when the instrument began clicking like an activated Geiger counter. Its synchroscope trigger had unquestionably detected the fringe of the electromagnetic field broadcast from Daskanerf. It told him that the field had been restored so that it covered again the entire Central Sea and the intruding Dwod Peninsula.

Half a mile farther on he visually found the pulse of the auroral effect rising up, a curving arch in the milky obscurity. He moved swiftly on into the convolutions of shifting shades and at length drew to an abrupt halt where the peninsula ended in a sheer, jagged-edged cliff over the invisible, fog-wrapped sea. He found to his amazement that there was no sound from below. Did the monsters of the Central Sea shun the aurora? The sea had been thunderously alive with them back at the peninsula's aurora-free base.

Or was there something else, some eldritch menace lurking here which even the gargantuan monsters shunned?

He was trembling. Moving back from the cliff's edge, he again apprehensively scanned the eerily pulsating fog. Certain that he was alone, he swung the magnelectograph's strap around behind his neck, holding the instrument like a counter before him.

He extended tiny, intricate disc-cones from their recesses, snapped on the magnetonar converter and bent his eyes to the dial series. He made slight adjustments to the carrier-operated cavity. The resulting pulses of purple snaking across the twin scopes of the polarstatic indicator and wave band indicator verified his earlier suspicions: the field of Daskanerf consisted wholly of circularly polarized interference which swept almost instantaneously across the entire magnetonar waveband!

No wonder his helijet's instruments had gone awry near Daskanerf! And no wonder the Ramsies had stolen the other magnelectrographs! The secret of their field was not safe as long as such an instrument was on Mag.

Ferns rustled suddenly behind him. He spun around as a dark figure leaped at him—the dark Ramsi, Morga—with arms outflung to thrust him over that awesome precipice.

Barris leaped desperately sidewise toward a small outcropping of rock, grasping its harsh surface with frantic fingers.

Morga tried to halt his charge, flailing at Barris with clawing hands, but went plunging past, screaming with rage, past and over the cliff, falling and vanishing into the foggy depths.

Barris clung trembling to the slippery, ragged rock, ears straining to catch a further outcry of the sound of the Ramsi's body plunging into the tideless sea. But as the shuddering

seconds went into minutes no other sound broke the foggy stillness—

With supreme effort Barris dragged himself up and regained his footing. He cast one last, panic-stricken glance down over the broken precipice and, heading east, ran blindly through the wet, softly clutching wilderness toward the wall, refusing to believe that the portal would be still closed.

It was not closed. He dashed through it ; then arrested his flight, turning, thinking.

The portal proceeded to close silently behind him and on its adamantine surface the bubble of the prayer plaque gleamed enigmatically.

Did the bubble hold a scanning pickup for some far remote equipment at which a Ramsi watched—the golden-bearded one, perhaps ? Or the other, the lovely one of long ago ?

Oh, God, Mag ! he thought, what is your secret ?

Darkness was gathering and with it fear began to mount in him again. He had to leave this lonely and dangerous place and get back to his own again lest the secret of the field of Daskanerf die with him here in the unknown terrors of alien night.

Chapter VII

By the time Barris reached Silvy Ward's vehicle the sharp edge of panic had dulled and he was thinking clearly.

Time, he told himself, was now most certainly of the essence. Unless positive action were taken with a minimum of delay, all would be lost.

Silvy was the Terran Base Administrator but Joseph Dargo was Chief of the Security Police. With full authority for enforcement of the regulations vested in him and backed by the Extraterran Security Code, Dargo could remove Ward from his command by simply declaring him unfit. Only the Terran High Council—when next in session on Terra—could question his edict.

Barris was certain that Morga had not fallen to his doom. The Ramsi had been conscious when he went over the cliff but his scream had been of rage, not of fear— No person consciously falling to his death would have remained silent. And he had certainly heard nothing to indicate that Ramsi's body had hit a ledge or the sea. He had only the nebulous

beginnings of an understanding of the means of transportation which the Ramsies employed but he felt sure that it had saved Morga from death.

There were two sources of certain danger—Dargo and Morga. Both unquestionably had numerous cohorts. Dargo had the Terran Base Security Police completely under his thumb. Morga as head of the Ramsies undoubtedly could if he chose send many agents to work his will. It seemed strange, indeed, that Morga had not already done so.

Valinda—what of her? Morga had apparently abducted her. It seemed likely that he had taken her to Daskanerf.

Barris was certain that the answer to every strangeness on Mag lay on fog-wrapped Daskanerf. He knew now how to get there. But he must move quickly.

What had the golden-bearded Ramsi said? "Death and delay run on the same track—" Yes, that was it.

He must get Arthur Ashley to meet him at the depot. They could adapt the necessary equipment together.

A check of the magnelectograph proved he was well outside Daskanerf's broadcast field. He immediately activated the transceiver in Ward's vehicle and pushed the number sequence for the desk at Dwod General Hospital.

"Dr. Modlin, please," he said urgently when the desk clerk responded.

Dargo would probably have men monitoring the magnetonar communications band; he'd have to speak cryptically.

"Modlin here—"

"Doc," he said, "this is your ex- but nameless patient. I need a double-A assist at the main vanishing point. Catch?"

Modlin hesitated briefly; then said, "Caught! More?"

"Alert big A little g for finalization. Over!"

Modlin hesitated again; then acknowledged.

"Out!" Barris said and killed the transceiver. Quickly he started the vehicle, gained the road and headed at top speed for the depot adjoining the spaceport near Dwod, confident that Modlin had understood that the *double-A* meant Arthur Ashley, the *main vanishing point* the depot, *Ag* the symbol for silver, hence Silvy, and *finalization* the planned flight to end on Daskanerf.

Barris had been with Charles "Chuck" Wilson, the stocky, middle-aged depot super, for ten minutes when a hospital vehicle dropped Ashley at the door and departed.

Barris was hurrying Ashley toward the magnetonar shop when the visifone buzzed in Wilson's office. Wilson went to answer it ; they saw his heavy face go stolid.

"Haven't seen Barris. Never heard of the other fellow. . . Sure I'll keep an eye . . . Oh, I'm here cleaning up paperwork. We lost a lot of incoming equipment on the *Kenya*. Have to requisition more . . . Sure ! Glad to ! Out !"

He switched off and came out. "Dargo sniffing after you two. Wouldn't say why."

Morga, irate from failure, had probably reported violations of sanctity. Dargo would give the investigation his personal attention.

"Can you keep him out if he comes here ?" Barris asked.

"Of course not !" Wilson said. "But I'll warn you by dimming the shop lights. Customary procedure to get the boys on a shiny jet when brass comes."

"Okay !" Barris said and hurried with Ashley to the magnetonar shop buried in shielding screens in the depot's heart.

Barris quickly related his findings, concluding with, "We just have to find some other way of polarizing magnetonar so that our signals will cut through the interference."

"Sixty-one Cygni," Ashley said.

"Cygni ?" Barris frowned.

"Sixty-one Cygni Expedition One struck an electromagnetic field a few billion miles short of Cygni's outermost planet's orbit which ripped them out of hyperspace into the normal space-time continuum. They had to stay in free fall in that ; they couldn't translate back and didn't have a reliable piece of equipment to permit astrogation. They'd never have reached Cygni anyway ; not enough fuel, food or time.

"Their electronics boys developed spiral polarization equipment and installed it in the field perception unit of the drive. It worked. We can adapt the idea to magnetonar. Rotating goniometers is the basis. The whole apparatus is governed by gyroscopic action and the phase angle of the emitted wave follows the sine angle in degrees as determined by the relationship of the goniometer primary and secondary fields. You'll get the idea ; let's get to work !"

Their trained fingers flashed, welding together gyroscopes, disc-cones, helipots, magnetstriction lines—

Two hours later they were tired but triumphantly regarding the two compact units and the unusually shaped antenna unit they had made.

The lights flickered.

"Dargo!" Barris cried. He seized a unit, dove into one of the big cases that held the tugs. Quickly entering the decontamination tug, he slipped the unit into the empty communications rack.

There were approaching footsteps and Dargo's flat voice:

"Lights wouldn't be on at this hour with the place vacant. You're not that bad a super, Wilson! Furthermore, Ward's vehicle is outside and he's been at headquarters for hours. It was last seen by my men racing away from Dwod General as they approached from the prison area. I believe that Barris either borrowed or stole it."

"I drove it here," Wilson said. "Sure, mine's out there but one of my boys had been using it and I happened to be—"

"Don't lie to me Wilson!" Dargo snapped. "This detector measures *any* heat radiation. Both motors show recent use. Now shut up while I test!"

Silence; then Dargo said, "Barris, I've spotted both you and your companion. I've a stunner and will use it in precisely thirty seconds if you don't come out!"

Barris knew that a stunner's radiation could reach him at practically full force despite the surrounding metal of the tug. He also knew that the thermocouple device which Dargo unquestionably held had betrayed his hiding place. He went quickly forth, calling to Ashley to join him.

Dargo confronted them, squat, incredibly muscular in his tight green uniform. His hairless head was bare. His heavy jowled face showed a twisted triumph. He said sneeringly, "So you broke under the regs at last, Barris! Leems was right; five years is enough for one not born here. I'm surprised you stood ten. Perhaps you'll be so fortunate as to be sent back to Terra now that you're cured, but I don't think so. Multiple violations mean death or at least mental erasure!"

Wilson, beside Dargo, chopped down sharply with the heel of his right hand, knocking the leveled stunner aside, Barris and Ashley leaped forward together.

Dargo swung his thick arms, sending stocky Wilson and slender Ashley sprawling and then catching Barris' wrists with crushing grasp.

Barris butted Dargo in the chest but the great arms tightened and Dargo brought his heavy chin down on Barris' head with stunning force.

Then Barris found himself wavering on his knees, semi-conscious, freed, staring dumbly at Dargo unconscious before him.

Wilson waved a steel bar. "Well, now I'm also eligible for the Dargo treatment ! Maybe a trip home, I hope !"

"What can we do now ?" Ashley asked nervously.

"Hide him," Barris said, rising dizzily.

"Can't you take him to the hospital ?" Wilson asked. "Maybe you could talk Modlin into keeping him under sedation. Hy Modlin's a good—"

"He's on our side already," Barris cut in. "But we couldn't get Dargo into Dwod General without being seen. Dargo's men are probably swarming all over the place. We'll be lucky not to get arrested, even without Dargo with us !"

"Well," Wilson said, "Silvy called while you were working and told me about an inspection tour and a flight tomorrow. I'm to expect Councilmen and Ramsies tomorrow morning. I couldn't very well hide Dargo here." He paused, pondering. "But, wait—maybe I can ! The reactor room's the place. It's off limits because of potential radiation poisoning but I can jury-rig shielding to protect Dargo and can give him enough sedation from the first aid kit to keep him unconscious—forever if you want !"

"If we can't finish what we're planning in twenty-four hours, we'll give up," Barris said. "Come on ; we'll help you with him."

Moments later they were in Wilson's office again.

"Chuck," Barris said, "when the Ramsies and Councilmen are here, tell the Councilmen—acting like they already know about it—that *that* new equipment damaged on the *Kenya* has been repaired and is to be shipped out on to the *Star of Botrodus* which is due in. Make sure the Ramsies overhear it. Okay ?"

"I get it," Wilson said. "After a while things start to penetrate as thick a skull as mine. Why did Silvy bring you the magnelectograph ? Why do you want decon tugs and portable instrument landing system equipment ? Why do you want to make something attractive to our thieving friends, the Ramsies ? Why, also, did Silvy order me to close the depot smack on mid-day tomorrow ? Why the big shindig and the flight ? It's all rather obvious, Hill.

"Now you two go back to the hospital and rest. Take Dargo's vehicle and dump it in the fern forest. Don't worry about Dargo ; he's set for not just tonight but a couple of nights. Get going now before some of his boys start missing him."

"Thanks, Chuck !" Barris said fervently.

"Don't thank me," Wilson answered. "Thank God Almighty that we're coming to our senses at last !"

Chapter VIII

Midnight. Ashley and Ortiz were sound asleep. Barris, on another bed squeezed into the thoroughly searched and now securely locked room, tossed restlessly.

Dargo was out of the way. Two of the Terran Security Police had questioned Barris and Ashley when they had returned to the hospital, but they had cleverly parried.

As Barris stared upward in the dimly lighted room, the image of a prayer plaque came unbidden into his mind, its opalascant bubble hypnotic eye between white wings.

He thought then of the prayer plaque in the locked library, of the beauty of it that brought remembrance of forbidden loveliness—and he knew that he must go and gaze upon it—

He felt no fear ; danger seemed far away.

He let himself out into the dim corridor, relocking the door behind him and walking swiftly and surely to the library. His right hand twirled the diallock with automatic precision. The door fell open. The golden-bearded Ramsi faced him from within.

Barris sensed a great physical magnetism emanating from the Ramsi and knew, without fear, that some strong alien persuasion was here at play.

This Ramsi was the antithesis of everything Morga was. Dark menace was constantly in Morga's face ; this strong face held only kindness—or godliness ! From the flowing golden hair to the very fringe of the deep blue robes, this Ramsi was every inch an angel of another god indeed !

There was urgency in the Ramsi's face.

"Hill Barris," he said, "I am Himar of Daskanerf. I have only moments but I had to warn you of the science that may be used against you. Morga was injured in a fall from the Dwod Peninsula, grazing against the cliff before managing to

project to Daskanerf. I arranged for sedation but one of Morga's friends may countermand my orders at any moment.

"I know of your plans. I was observing through the focus-point—prayer plaque, you Terrans call it!—which was mounted here when you spoke with Ward, Modlin, Ashley and Ortiz. Fortunately it was I and not Morga at the master viewing console then! I've dismounted the focuspoint now; no other Ramsi can project to here or observe this room henceforth."

Barris, gazing at the prayer plaque in the Ramsi's hand, knew then that he had to believe in Himar's sincerity; otherwise all was lost!

"Morga suspects that I've helped you, not only by treating Ashley, Ortiz and you, but also in observing through the focus-points and using my influence upon you. In Morga's absence, I observed you through the focuspoint on the peninsula and remotely opened the portal both upon your entrance and departure. I assume that Morga tried to kill you there."

Barris nodded, speechless with thanks for the one who had cured him.

"Morga does not yet know that I stole Valinda from this very room, and have her in seclusion on Daskanerf. She is infinitely safer there than she would be here.

"I should tell you this: I am the only living descendant of Rams. I would now be ruler of the Ramsies, as you call us, had not Rams willed that Morga should succeed to the supreme power for life with such power thereafter to revert to the blood of Rams.

"Morga is as your Leems was—a racial purist to the point of fanaticism. I feel that the regulations should be abolished and that Terrans and Maggians should intermingle and intermarry freely for the common good. Morga, on the other hand wants to eliminate completely even the insignificant exchange of knowledge that has existed. I'm sure you understand; your own history reveals that discrimination has not always been non-existent on Terra!"

Barris asked suddenly, "But if Morga holds supreme power, how good are our chances of success?"

"If you can bring a ship to Daskanerf, that will be enough," Himar answered. "Morga has kept the majority of the Ramsies in agreement through convincing them of the

superiority of our science. His continual thefts from the Terran Base Depot helped him do so.

"If you can reach Daskanerf through cleverness in using *our* means of transportation, and then prove that yours can also circumvent the field of Daskanerf, I think that an unjust and jealous leader will be overthrown. Rams must not have wholly trusted Morga; the Code prescribes that succeeding leaders may be removed by majority action of our council."

Himar paused as a faint buzzing sound came from the dismounted focuspoint.

"I must go now; Morga is conscious. A friend now warns me."

Barris found the Ramsi suddenly handing him the diary which he had thought lost.

"I'm sorry for having taken this from you on Daskanerf. I had to be sure that I was right and Morga wrong. I *am* sure now; your written words have told me all I need to know of the innate decency and sincerity of Terrans. You and your companions will, I know, be welcome on Daskanerf.

"The library is safe now but, Hill Barris, beware of Dargo, for he is a friend of Morga and, most curiously, an even greater purist than Leems was.

"And mark this well; a Ramsi can only project to a focuspoint—or prayer plaque, if you will—but not when it is moving. Moreover, the focuspoint must be clear.

"Good luck, Hill Barris. Safe passage to Daskanerf! Val awaits you there—and a cure awaits your friends!"

So saying, the Ramsi touched his hands to something beneath the robes at his waist—and instantly vanished.

My God! Barris thought. *This is like hyperspace travel. The theory and math must be basically akin—*

He suddenly felt very lonely. He had so many questions to ask—

Why had Himar said Val was safer on Daskanerf than she would be here? There must be more than the menace of Dargo and the threat of enforcement of the regulations. What did the regulations mean anyway when they said no female Terran under thirty should be allowed to land on Mag? Was there something here that endangered younger Terran women, something that didn't exist on Daskanerf or from which a woman could be shielded there?

His mind seized upon Himar's last phrase : "—a cure awaits your friends !" He himself had been cured on Daskanerf. Was that because a curative dose was determinable when the disease was of comparatively long duration but not when newly contracted ? Or had Himar deliberately failed to cure Ortiz and Ashley to give them all a great incentive to tear away the veil from Daskanerf ? Had Himar taken Val away for the same reason ?

Barris wandered from the library, leaving its door ajar, and returned to his bed.

He felt he would not—could not—sleep, but fell almost instantly into heavy, dreamless slumber.

Chapter IX

There is a great nervous tension when you know full well that danger lurks all about you against which you have but little defence—danger that can whisper in on the very magnetic lines of force which band this alien world, whispering out of some strange focuspoint, suddenly real and strong and overpowering !

Barris said nothing to his companions of Himar's visit. Can you tell a man of Sol that someone of another sun hadn't fully cured him because the alien thought, for reasons at least partly selfish, that the fact he wasn't cured might help him ? Can you do that without instilling in the Terran a sudden hatred, however unreasonable, of the benefactor who had failed to be completely beneficent ?

Barris briefed Ortiz at breakfast ; then they and Ashley sped to the hangar adjoining the depot in a hospital car.

They found that Wilson's men had already mounted the twin antenna bank on the patrol ship. Barris and Ashley left Ortiz at the ship. Wilson waved them into the depot, his faint smile telling them that Dargo was still safely secured.

No one was in the depot proper. Since the Ramsi focuspoint was in a secluded room down a corridor they could not be observed from it. They realized, however, that the depot would not be vacant long and each of them hastily entered a tug case.

The hurrying was done and the waiting began.

As the moments dragged by in the tight darkness of the tug, doubts began to assail Hill Barris.

Did the Ramsies' robes hold the secret of sustaining life during their flashing passage through a space-time warp? Lacking such shielding, were he and Ashley going to death?

Had Himar really taken Val? Or had it been Morga? Were Himar and Morga really hand in hand to reject Terrans from Mag? Was it Alpha Centauri all over again?

And Barris recalled the terse words of the third regulation: "There shall be no inter-racial association whatsoever except with Ramsies—"

What of the native girl of ten years ago? Was some dark, twisted revenge coming now because of his brief but burning acquaintance with her? It was certainly Val he loved but the other had been so lovely—and so near—

And, Val, if she were on Daskanerf—was she truly safe?

Whatever was to come he had to believe in Himar's representations of friendship—

Muffled voices were passing the case: Wilson's rumbling bass, Councilmen and Ramsies—

Barris could just barely hear them. He managed to make out a few of Wilson's words, enough to know that the seed had been planted.

The depot was silent again.

I must keep my mind occupied, Barris thought. He ran his hands lightly over the equipment he and Ashley had made: the glidepath localizer unit and the transceiver; and then over the tug's twin control columns and around to the bulkhead of the engine compartment. His fingers paused on the capsules of fuel for the atomic motor. *Fuel enough*, he thought, *for all the time we'll probably have—*

He urgently wished to review with Ashley what they planned to do when and if they reached Daskanerf. Better judgment told him that magnetonar silence must be kept. Ramsies might be monitoring the waveband. Dargo's men *certainly* would be. Any unreadable, unexplainable signal would provoke the curiosity of one group or the other.

Time crawled by. He found himself nodding, fought sleep, lost.

When he woke with a start he found that nearly six hours had passed. 1545 hours. Time was getting short; Julian would long since have landed at Bebryan, would now be heading back on the airway!

He reached out in the darkness and ran his hands over the equipment again. Once the localizer was pointed due west along Daskanerf's central plain, the unit would send out a carrier beam to the heli-disc-cone radiators. Two spirally polarized patterns would be obtained, upon each of which would be superimposed a different modulation frequency. The patrol ship's receiver with its similarly polarized twin antenna bank coming from the west would find the two modulations equal. The vertical needle of the ship's movable cross-pointer indicator would remain vertical. As long as the ship stayed on course, that needle would not deviate, but if the ship strayed horizontally and received one modulation frequency stronger than the other, then the needle would move correspondingly downward to right or left until Ortiz guided the ship back to the sharp course between the two patterns.

Barris' mind jerked back from conjecture. A faint sound came from outside the case, as of something being attached to it with utmost stealth.

Silence save for the whisper of racing pulse.

His mind returned to the equipment. *If*—he thought, and thrust the word from his mind. *When* they reached Daskanerf in or near the Temple of Rams on the island's only reported highpoint, they would break out of the cases with the tugs and descend the mountain to the plain. Ashley would have to reach a point adjacent to the proposed touchdown point for the ship so that his glidepath could throw up its twin patterns, each with its superimposed modulation frequency, to form the angle for the ship's descent, to activate the horizontal needle of the ship's indicator and complete the vibrant cross which would guide Julian in for a landing.

It sounded easy. Chances were it wouldn't be.

Unaccountably, he thought suddenly of Joseph Dargo. With the spying devices at their disposal, the Terran Base Security Police would certainly soon find their strange leader. On the other hand, they might already have found him.

Himar had said that Dargo was a friend of Morga. Were Morga and Dargo working together, Morga playing upon the fact that Dargo was Magborn and apparently of half Maggian blood? Were Morga and Dargo together somewhere now waiting to spring some unthinkable trap for Ashley and himself?

His mind whirled into a maelstrom—

And he was giddy, nauseous—and he *whisked*—and he was still in the darkness of the tug inside its case, but he knew then as surely as he knew there was a greater god than Rams that the case was no longer in the depot at Dwod !

There was excited murmuring from outside : voices speaking the liquid language of Mag. Ramsies, certainly, *many* Ramsies !

Time : 1639. Only a minute since he last had looked !

As he reached for the transceiver, he heard the case's outer latches being torn free. Unhesitatingly he activated the transceiver and said, "Ashley, answer !"

"Here," Ashley responded. "Wherever here is !"

"Rams' Temple, I think. Let's break out before they pry us out. Once oriented, we'll move accordingly. Follow me. Once we reach the plain, you get a half mile west of me and four hundred feet right of the centreline so Julian won't drop on you. Use gyrosteering so we'll be lined up properly."

"Right ! Let's go !"

Barris activated the tug's atomic motor. The caterpillar tread surged. The vehicle's heavily shielded snout smashed through the case's hinged end.

Upon the tug's periscreen flashed the interior of the Temple : fluted columns, rich, blue draperies, dozens of startled, berobed Ramsies rushing from his path.

An arch ahead. Stairs down which the tug rolled bouyantly, tread blocks clattering sharply.

Out of the massive building now, the mountainside falling away before him, jagged, nearly precipitous, its slope strangely naked of the lowhanging clouds overhead and of the fogbanks writhing on the valley floor far below.

Twisting down that tortuous slope was what had once been a road, a rutted, eroded trace of a trail now, mute evidence that those who once used it travelled now via another means of transportation.

Barris headed down that shadow of a long-dead road, praying the tug's protesting bogey wheels would stand the pounding of the raggedly eroded surface and not cast off the spinning tracks.

He turned toward a sheer precipice on his left, jerked urgently on twin steering columns and slowed on the verge of a deep, rock-rimmed washout. He called a warning to Ashley over the transceiver as he slowly navigated the gulch.

Out of the washout now, the road suddenly clean and clear, straight down into the dense fog on the plain. Knowing impossibly there was nothing to obstruct him, he drove into the fog with the swooping descent of a preying hawk.

"Heading East, Art!" he cried exultantly.

"West, Hill! See you later, I hope!"

The atomic motors whined. The tugs blindly separated on whirling tracks, racing into white, turbulent obscurity.

On and on.

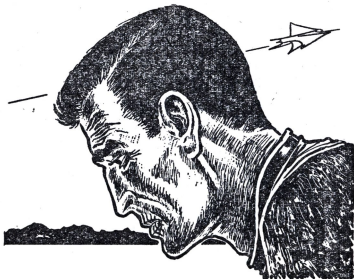
We're blundering, Barris thought. Going nowhere on through endless fog. 1650 hours with the beams not fixed.

Now here we are! Positions! Stopping, turning, heading west. Localizer on!

There you are, Julian! There's your runway centreline on this blasted island! There's the line from me to you and I hope to God you're there!

"Art, are you in position?" he cried at the transceiver.

"Yes, Hill. Glide path on just—but look at the time! If Julian passed Mount Murro—"



"Maybe he received the localizer signal. I've had it on for a minute now."

"I wish we knew!"

"We never will know until he goes subsonic. He'll have nearly landed before we get the sound wave."

"Yeah," Ashley said pessimistically, "if he's coming. Perhaps we were—*Now*, what the devil? Something's just dropped in through the antenna port! Bouncing around like a rubber ball. It's stopped. Hill, it's glowing like a prayer plaque! It's—*oh, God! here's Morga!*"

The transceiver's speaker crackled and heterodyned. Ominous silence followed.

"Art!" Barris cried. "For God's sake, answer!"

Silence—and then another voice came:

"This is Morga, Barris. I did not die on the peninsula as you probably thought. Don't worry about Ashley; I have only stunned him for now. He must, however, suffer complete memory erasure or death as will you and all other violators.

"Your scheme is wrecked now, Barris. I have turned off this primitive beam unit; you will not bring a ship to Daskanerf now!"

Barris quickly activated the glide path unit in his duplicate equipment so that both it and the localizer beam were emanating from his tug. Pulling the beams' sources together made his tug the precise touchdown point for the incoming ship—if it was incoming! He was a sitting duck with twin beads converging on him, but there was no choice!

His mind cried, *Whatever Morga has done to Ashley I must prevent being done to me!*

"Morga," he cried into the transceiver, "the ship cannot reach Daskanerf now. It must be dropping uncontrollably into the sea—a great loss to Terra but equally a loss to Mag! At least ten Ramsies are aboard; do you not wish to save them?"

Morga's exultant voice rasped in the speaker. "So Himar hasn't told you of our projection! I thought you knew when you tricked us into removing the cases from Dwod. No, those of Daskanerf have nothing to fear!"

"But, Morga, I do not understand," Barris said, hoping to temporize.

There was no response.

Morga must have left Ashley's tug, must now be striding through the swirling fog toward him—

If he could only close the antenna port ! But he could not do so while—if—the ship were on the beams.

Ashley had said that something—a focuspoint in sphere form, surely—had been dropped into his tug before Morga had projected himself inside.

What had Himar said ? That a focuspoint must be motionless ?

Could he oscillate the tug sufficiently to maintain a rideable pair of beams yet deny Morga a usable focuspoint ?

He moved the tug forward, slamming on the brakes so the vehicle bobbed wildly on its springs, slammed it into reverse before the shock absorbers took hold, slammed the brakes again.

Forward — backward — forward — backward — oscillating, oscillating —

The beams were certainly penduluming but they must be fanning out sufficiently so that Julian Ortiz would still receive them until he was within a few miles of the landing. Then the beams' paths would be so tight and close together that the transmitting units would have to be kept stationary to make the beams reliable.

He would be forced to stop oscillating the tug when the ship throttled to subsonic speed for landing !

Something came hurtling down through the antenna port then, bouncing as Ashley had said another something had bounced ; then rolling back and forth on the rocking floor.

Morga was surely clinging outside, waiting for the oscillation to cease so that he might project himself within—

Above the tug's whining motor Barris heard the throbbing of jets. *The patrol ship was coming in !*

His teeth clenched, he cut the tug's motor. Simultaneously Morga's voice cried exultantly outside he tug.

A focuspoint must be clear ! Barris thought frantically.

He turned and dove for the stationary focuspoint sphere, seized it, straightened, and snapped open the motor's tiny fuel compartment. He thrust the sphere inside—and was instantly splattered with blood and sundered flesh and splintered bone fragments bursting expandingly from the open door of the compartment which could not have contained the body of a dwarf—

Barris was seized then with violent nausea. In that retching, tortured moment he was dimly aware that the incoming ship

had apparently made visual contact since it was taking evasive action, zooming overhead, rocking the tug sickeningly with fierce turbulence of frantically blasting jets.

He dragged himself weakly from the malodorous, blood-stained tug, gulping in the clean damp air of the plain, almost completely oblivious to the sounds from the eastern fog which told him the ship was safely down and taxiing back.

The ground was solid beneath his numbed and weary feet, solid for a moment and then it was spinning on a shifting, mad eccentric and he was toppling forward, exhausted and ill—

Chapter X

A dream again—

Not a nightmare of swirling, eternal fog enfolding the dark, dead, bloody face of Morga but instead a dream of Val—

Oh, God! Val, how many dreams have I dreamt of you?

The dream was reality, the miasmic fog of a lonely decade gone. He lay upon a padded table in that dimly remembered white aseptic room on Daskanerf and Val was smiling down at him.

"Val!"

Warmth of unforgotten lips on his own again, long blonde wavy hair tumbling silkily against his tear-wet cheeks.

"Hello, Hill!"

Oh, Val! he thought, how could I have ever even for a moment embraced another?

"It's been a long time," he said.

"Too long, darling!"

Her vibrant voice sang through him. Her arms were helping him now to a sitting position, caressing him, and her body was strong and warm against his.

He sobbed. The years had been so long, the emptiness so great—

"Hill Barris!" Himar's voice came now, softly comforting across the room.

He told himself that the nightmare was truly gone. Morga's blood was no longer upon him. He was cleansed, new.

"Sorry," he said, "things caught up with me."

Val's slender fingers were disturbing yet soothing magic on his temples.

"Hill," Himar said, "time may still be of the essence. Your stay on Mag may have to end."

"But surely you are not considering expelling us as Morga wished!"

"No. Your friends shall, of course, hereafter have full access to all Mag. What I meant is that Valinda may have to return to Terra without delay. I feel you would wish to go with her."

"When I learned from your diary that she is only twenty-six, I brought her here hoping to shield her. I hope I was successful!"

"Shield her?" Barris asked puzzledly.

Himar surveyed him compassionately. "Think carefully on this, Hill. Can you face the fact that Valinda might one day bear you a son as physically unattractive to your way of thinking as Joseph Dargo must appear not only to you and her but to all Terrans?"

"But Dargo was a cross. His mother was undoubtedly a Maggian!"

A twisted smile appeared upon the Ramsi's lips. "A cross? So Leems and Rams and Morga said to conceal the fact that Dargo was the son of Leems' younger daughter and of Philip Dargo of Terra, thus completely of Terran ancestry!"

"Why do you think Leems established the Fifth Regulation? Because, Hill, Leems was a fanatical purist. His two daughters were with LEO. Both wed Terrans, conceived on Mag and bore male children here. One daughter was thirty-one, the other twenty-five. The older daughter's child was normal for his parentage; the younger daughter's was not."

"On that basis, substantiated by the findings of his medical staff, Leems established the fifth regulation. He established the others to obviate a recurrence and also to prevent inter-marriage of our races."

"It is an established fact that Lalande's rays affect the chromosomes of women of your race under thirty so that their offspring will be in every respect physically identical to the Maggians you have seen. You may correctly gather from that that we would be as you of Sol were it not for our sun. To us it is normalcy; to you it may seem as monstrous as Morga taught Dargo it is. I hope it does not."

Another Ramsi had entered the room and drew Himar aside, speaking swiftly in the Ramsi tongue.

Barris swung stiffly to the floor and leaned back against the table, right arm around Valinda's waist. He thought silently of hairless, thickset Dargo, one of solely Terran ancestry who undoubtedly was handsome according to certain Maggian standards.

You had to discount the Ramsies, he thought ; they must be of a slightly different race. Perhaps here on Daskanerf the Ramsies had learned to shield their women until past the age when Lalande's rays would affect their offspring. That should account for the fact that the Ramsies were different from Dargo and the hairless men of Mag whom Barris had so often seen in both Bebryan and Dwod.

Well, whatever happened the barriers between the races were down now.

Mag would welcome colonists—and permanent colonies could not be established without children and children's children as a consequence. Terra needed a permanent colony on Mag. Only Terra of all Sol's worlds was truly habitable ; and in all the systems searched within five parsecs, only three other habitable worlds had been found—that in Alpha Centauri which had rejected them, one just found in Procyon and, of course, Mag of Lalande 21,185.

Someday there would certainly be an intermingling of the races of the suns, humans and humanoids. Perhaps interbreeding of the finer strains of Terra and Mag might produce a civilization welcome to the austere Centaurians. The fanaticism of Leems could not stand in the way of a truly Galactic race !

Barris smiled perplexedly. One day Val might, indeed, bear him a son. But might he not be like the Ramsies, tall, splendid, strong ?

Whatever Himar might say would make no difference, really. If not here and now, then sometime somewhere else Terran genes or chromosomes would be altered by the rays of other suns. And obviously from what he had heard of Morga and others, those of Mag looked forward to a life expectancy much greater than that of Terrans—

He had turned to Val when Himar spoke again.

" I'm afraid it's too late, Hill ; the tests we've made of Val are positive !"

A strangely satisfied smile came to Val's face where Barris had thought to see quick dismay. He turned back to Himar then and said, " Why should Val seem *pleased* ?"

"Perhaps not exactly pleased," Himar said, "but I believe that Valinda realized some time ago that mankind, including both our races, must accept change if we are to spread to other stars.

"Valinda entered the walled city of Dwod. She learned what no other Terran since Leems has known, but I'm sure she faces the knowledge much differently than Leems.

"I asked you if you could face the fact that Valinda might bear a son like Dargo—a fact which you now must squarely face. Can you also face the fact that any daughter she may bear will be a normal female human being—a normal *Terran*, shall we say?—except that as maturity comes she will grow a little taller and infinitely more hirsute than even Terran males and, unless veiled as other mature Maggian women, will certainly be taken for one of those whom you have apparently thought to be males, namely we Ramsies?"

Hill Barris, regarding Himar's compassionate, bearded face, realized with a flooding of mixed emotions that that slender Maggian girl of long ago and Himar of Daskanerf were one!

But love or passion—whatever had been between them—had waned in the lost years between. Only friendship—a great and true friendship—remained.

His eyes locked with Himar's and the Ramsi's fixed glance sealed him to secrecy in that silent exchange.

He turned to Val then and found the promise of a fine and new tomorrow in her smiling, tear-streaked face.

—John Victor Petersen

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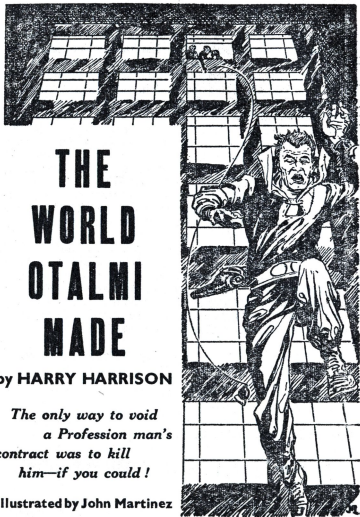
(Sorry, but No. 3 is out of print)

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



Harry Harrison spends much of his life globe-trotting from one country to another—a year ago he was in Mexico, while this year he is lazing in the sunshine of the Isle of Capri. Wherever he sets up his typewriter, however, you can be sure that in the cool of the evening he will be writing stories of action and adventure.

The World Otalmi Made

by HARRY HARRISON

Chapter 1

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. Pushing 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 biggest 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-metre, 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 half-way. 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 without 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 a 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 *honour*. Honour cannot be destroyed, even if a man is killed. While both parties are alive the contract stands. If you cancel the contract 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 number of gangs hid out there and of necessity had to have a working agreement with each other. You've heard of *thieves' honour*. 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 favour 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 Pro-

fession 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 under 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 anaesthetic, 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 humour 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 neighbourhood, an island of light in a sea of black buildings. The B.I.S. The Secret Police. The headquarters of Otlalmi'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, invisible 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 uniform 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 centre . . . 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. Grek 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 ship. 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 levelled 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 vice-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—!"

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 metres 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 reflexes, 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 unsnapped 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 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 metre 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—!

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 armoured 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 favour 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 cushioned 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 power-cart. 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 Arthur 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 discoloured 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. Otolmi 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 Otolmi took over. We have an organization, mostly scientific workers, who were united in mild protest against the oppression. Now, of course, Otolmi 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 centres of motivation. What used to be called the ego. 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 defence perimeter and knew what he had to face. Defence 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 defences.

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 gasped, 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 defence 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. The river. 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 snipped easily and he care-

fully molded the putty over the ends of the wires before 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 water-proof 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. Adlan 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 Kostı 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 metre above the ground and was topped by a cluster

of globes and lenses. One of them was slowly turning 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 happ—"

"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 travelled 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 centimetres 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 anaesthesia 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 programme."

"Offer accepted," Brek said softly into her ear.

Otalmi looked at his two closest friends and smiled with happiness.

—Harry Harrison

In the next issue :

VENGEANCE OF THE SPACE ARMADAS

by **CALVIN M. KNOX**

The concluding story of the "Chalice" trilogy.

*Faylad was the best spy Donnobir had—
until he became a turncoat against his will !*

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 favourite 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 grey-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. Rumour 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 travelled 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 counterspy.

Slowly and with unusual care Calder walked around the gang of chortling barflies admiring 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 barkeep 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 flavour; 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 and 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 sleevefasteners 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 Theatre 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 manoeuvre 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 dancing 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 Earthman 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 centre of the city, heading toward Dombriil 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 a 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 eye-brow-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. Dombriil 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 Dombriil 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. Dombriil 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 Dombriil 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.

" Halt," 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 defences 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 hence-forward 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 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 Earthman 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."

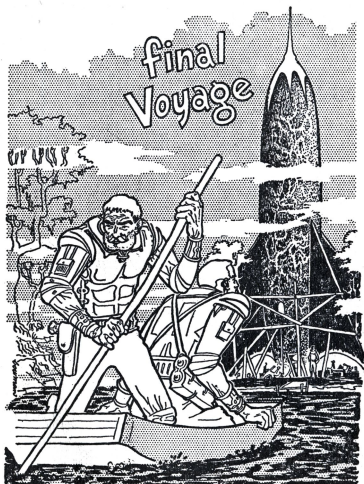
They lined him up against the cold stone. Faylad understood. Evidently they knew he had been the one who had carried word of the secret offensive to the Earthmen ; he was wanted dead or alive as a traitor to the Emperor, and these men were taking the proclamation literally.

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.

—Ralph Burke

by Basil Wells



FINAL VOYAGE

by **BASIL WELLS**

*The Janelace was a hulk that would never fly again.
Even I couldn't deny that—and I'm the Janelace !*

Illustrated by Bowman

Myra Lacey came swiftly down along the muddy ditch of trail that links the spaceport dump with the native city. Greyish ooze coated her plastic mudalls and had splashed as high as her shielded, pert-nosed face.

She clawed frantically at my outer lock. As she stumbled inside for the first time I sensed the vibrations of distant flame blasts and paralyzing lectros.

I knew what that meant. The threatened revolt of the Venusian colonists and their native "Frog" allies had broken out.

The girl's feet raced across the inner lock and I felt her hurrying down my empty, rusting corridors toward my galley. As she ran, she threw back the transparent hood designed to shield her wavy mop of bronze from the endless Venusian rain.

"Pe.er !" she called. "Volcano—Brand !"

An unlovely scrawny neck poked out through my open galley door and the grey bearded old head capping it blinked water grey eyes. Suddenly the huge black pipe projecting from the beard vomited smoke and ashes.

"Myra," he said sadly, "ain't I told you not to come busting in here without warning ? Here I be wearing just my

pants and undershirt. No way to greet the owner of the *Janelace*."

"Volcano!" gasped the girl, "the rebellion has come. They've taken over the city and the spaceport. The Earth garrison won't last a day."

"Nice going," applauded Volcano Manby, his loose-jointed old frame straightening painfully, "maybe now there'll be work enough to go around. About time Venus was free."

"But Volcano, they're mining the spaceport!" The girl was breathless. "Don't you understand? My brother Ralph's with the Earth fleet. Due here next week, all four ships. The rebels will mine the landing port—blow them up!"

"Myra!" The dark-eyed young man came up behind her with his quick hitching gait. Captain Peter Durfee had lost his leg in a power explosion just off Ganymede, an explosion that had cost him his ship and his job with Planetary Trading. Since then he had been living here in my old rusting hulk with two other unemployed spacers, Volcano and squatty Brand Parker.

"We've got to warn them, Peter." Myra's fingers clamped Durfee's arm nervously. "They've stripped all the space freighters in port of their fuel mixers; they can't take off. I thought maybe your radio beam . . ."

Durfee shook his head. His straight lips tightened. "I'm sorry, Myra," he said. "So far all my experiments have bumped into a blank wall. I can't punch through the Heaviseide. Once in space the beam will carry messages for an unlimited distance, depending on the power of the impulse, but we are not in space."

"And won't be," said Myra bitterly. "If only the *Janelace* were in a shape for takeoff."

Volcano cleared his throat. "The old *Janelace*'d take off now," he said, "if we only had a goop mixer. We been working on the old tub these last three years, Myra, patching up the plates and trimming the jets. She'd carry us out into space easy."

"But we have no mixer." Durfee frowned and snapped his fingertips at a fraying cuff. "If the Frogs and the colonists have seized all the mixers, the *Janelace* is helpless."

"Couldn't we blast off with manual controls?" Myra demanded.

"And get the life jarred out of us with every blast even if the

jets didn't explode?" Durfee shook his head. "Human bones will stand only so much. The rocket fuel must be fed into the jets in mathematically exact proportions at exact intervals—that's why we need that robot control."

"Nothing to worry about," a deep hoarse voice roared at Myra's elbow, and Brand Parker's squatty scarred body bowlegged past her to face the trio. "Nothing to worry about," he repeated with a blink of his one good eye.

"What do you mean, Brand?" Durfee snapped. "Not that I love the Earth fleet so much, but this trap the rebels are planning turns my stomach. When Earth learns of it they'll really bomb the life out of Venus. If we can prevent the fleet's destruction, Earth may grant us independence—"

"The *Janelace*'ll take off again," grinned Brand lopsidedly through his ragged pinkish moustache, "yep, she'll take off again."

The thought of being in space again made me forget for the moment the conversation of the humans inside my clumsy bulk. A ship in the course of thirty or forty years of use in space absorbs the personalities and knowledge of her crews in a way that's hard to explain. Perhaps it's the action of the unshielded radiations out there in the blessed weightlessness of space, or perhaps . . .

So here I lay in the lowlands below the plateau island of Tular with the thidin vines covering my scaling plates and the ugly debris of Tular City's city dump heaped around me, and I was dreaming of the chill airlessness of space. I'd still be blasting out there, I reflected bitterly, if Planetary Trading hadn't planted one of their men on board to wreck my controls as we braked down for a landing here on Tular.

I'd been the last of Corwin Lacey's fleet of spacers to go, and when Corwin Lacey was killed in my final crash his daughter had found work as a waitress in one of Tular City's smelly cafes. With the stubborn pride of the Laceys, she and her brother had refused to sell my broken hulk for scrap. Someday they had hoped to repair my shattered drive mechanisms and again blast spaceward. Only two of the crew had stayed with me. Old Volcano Manby, the cook, and Brand Parker, a tube man. Later, they had brought a broken, drink-fogged wreck of a man to live with them in their quarters—the now trim-looking, greying-haired young captain without a ship, Peter Durfee.

And for three long years I'd wallowed in the sour smell of grey Venusian mudland with the scaly yellow *vallids* scrabbling lizard-like across my plates and nesting in my rocket tubes, while the *nik-nik* brush and snaky twining thidin vines closed in to bury me from the sight of men. . . .

"Brand, you dirty pirate !" Captain Durfee's voice was suddenly more alive and vibrant with excitement than I had ever heard it before. "Not that I blame you for not reporting your discovery of that missing Planetary freighter before, but —ten crated mixers !"

"Wouldn't have got more than fifty credits reward for finding them," grumbled Brand. "No more than fifty. Nope. Wouldn't buy another mixer for the *Janelace*."

"This may save Ralph's neck, and block a real war with Earth, Myra !" Durfee's arm was tight around the girl's waist, and she seemed pleased that it was there. I may be a welded conglomeration of metal and plastics, but I know what love means. They were just finding out.

Volcano grumbled. His pipe had gone out, and he was ladling a new charge of homegrown greenish tobacco into its amazingly capacious maw.

"A goop mixer weighs quarter of a ton," he said. "You said the wreck's three miles out in the swamp. How do we get one of them here ? Fly it out ? Or hire a half dozen swamp Frogs to freight it out on their backs ?"

"We'll use mud boats." Captain Durfee's voice was crisp and incisive. "Today we'll check over the ship and get it ready for space. I imagine the *vallids* have fouled up the jets again with their nests ; they'll have to be cleaned out. Check up on the two spacesuits, Brand, we may need them if the *Janelace* cracks open on the takeoff."

"Do I smell something burning ?" Myra wrinkled her generous uptilted nose.

"My stew !" Volcano dashed madly into the galley.

"You boys haven't eaten yet ?" Myra smiled. "Of course not. I came back from the city when I first heard the news. The boss will be firing me if I don't hurry back."

"He'll never miss you." Durfee laughed. "There'll be so much excitement in Tular City today that there'll be no eating. Better stick around for lunch."

"What you having, Volcano ?" Myra called.

"Vallid steaks and stew," Volcano admitted gloomily.

"With thidin shoots and nik-nik fruit on the side," groaned Durfee. "That's our regular diet here aboard the *Janelace*. If it wasn't for the stale bread and cakes Brand wangles from the wife of some city baker we'd get indigestion."

"Why, Brand!" Myra grinned cheerfully at the tube-man's reddening face. "I'm learning a lot about you today."

She turned to Durfee. "Sorry, Peter," she said sweetly, "but I think I'll eat at the cafe today. I'll get enough swamp food after we blast off for Earth."

With a squeeze of Durfee's arm she was gone back along my corridor. She adjusted the transparent hood of her mudalls as she opened my outer lock and went out into the misty thickness of the outer atmosphere.

"She thinks we'll take her along!" Durfee rubbed at his bleached-out square chin. "But she can't go. I doubt if we have fuel enough to more than escape Venus' drag. There'll be no landing on Earth or any other planet."

"One way trip?" Brand scratched at his scraggly pink locks with a thick-nailed thumb. "Oh well, suits me fine, just fine. Be good to see the stars again. Stars and sun. Good place to die. Yep, good place."

Volcano's pipe jutted around the door-frame. Smoke belched. "Ain't you spacers hungry?" he demanded. "Fill up. We got plenty work to do."

"Leave the dishes, Volcano." Durfee was strapping on one of his ancient revolvers, one of the dozens salvaged from the tons of debris heaped around my resting place. "We're going out to take a look at the wreck."

"Follow my directions carefully," warned Brand, "in this everlasting fog you can lose your way easily. Lose it very easily. Maybe I better go along. Maybe I better."

"You have work enough here checking the tubes and the wiring," said Captain Durfee as he zippered shut the front of his patched yellowish mudalls. "If you get all the vallid nests dug out before we get back, you can gather thidin shoots, mush roots, and shoot a few more vallids."

"Yessir," said Brand. Now that an emergency had come the old easy relationship was gone. Durfee was the captain now.

Volcano struggled and wriggled his lanky warped old body into another of the yellowed plastic envelopes that are standard equipment for mudland colonists on Venus and with his unlit

pipe clenched between his teeth followed Durfee out of the galley. I saw them go down to the vine-hidden dock where their two flat-bottomed swamp boats were tied, and then the swirling greyish mist swallowed them.

Deep down inside my vitals, Brand worked with wrenches and blowtorch. He checked over the crude but sturdy repairs they had made upon my twisted plates and framework. He tested the circuits that operated the emergency locks and the individual fire controls of each of my sixty-seven major and minor jets. And on the swivel joints of the dozens of hydroponic tanks, where the oxygen-freeing green growths of three worlds luxuriated, he squirted oil.

Then he went outside to check my jets. The wooden plugs that sealed off their narrow mouths were covered with fungus and purple mould, so he did not touch them; but half a dozen of my main jets had been invaded by the lizard-like vallids and these he set about ejecting from their snug nests. Brand knew that any obstruction, even the eggs or bony-plated body of a vallid, might cause the rocket tubes to explode. The jets must be cleared of all foreign matter.

Brand grinned suddenly, his scarred face twisting. "They hate smoke," he said, "especially tobacco smoke. Yep, tobacco smoke. Remember when Volcano drove off half a dozen of 'em with that pipe of his."

A quick trip back into his quarters yielded about four pounds of the flaky green-leaved tobacco that Volcano smoked. This he divided into six piles and heaped deep inside the tubes. A moment later six trickles of acrid smoke rolled sluggishly out into the shifting dank fog.

The tube man scurried for the shelter of my outer lock—nor was he a moment too soon. For from the jet's interiors vallids came boiling out, great five-foot lengths of black-spotted yellowish ferocity with snaggle-toothed long snouts gaping savagely. Behind the males came the shorter-snouted females, their eight stubby legs clawing them along, and their jaws champing angrily as they kept up an eternal complaining whistle.

Most of the vallids headed for the swamplands at once but two of the more persistent required a touch or two of Brand's flameblast before they retreated. After that it was a simple matter to rake out the empty nests, and the few lopsided reddish eggs in two of them, before turning an air hose into the jets.

Brand plugged the cleaned jets before he left, and spent the remainder of the day polishing up my corroded control-room metal. From time to time he peered out the porthole facing the landing dock, and by chance saw the return of Durfee and Volcano Manby.

They were not alone. Five of the short, grey-skinned Frogs, the naked web-footed natives of the Venusian swamplands, were with them, and balanced on a framework linking the two mud boats sat the crated cube that was a fuel mixer!

He hurried down the soupy slope to join them as they brought the boats ashore. With the help of the natives the mixer was on the semi-solid mud of the landing before he reached them.

"We'll be blasting off in the morning," said Durfee tautly.

"How about the natives?" Brand asked, frowning. "Won't they report our having a goop mixer? Won't they?"

"These are swampers," Durfee barked something at the Venusians in their native tongue and they heaved up on the poles lashed across the mixer's bulk. "They don't know there's been a revolt yet. By the time they do report us we'll be gone—or dead!"

The five Venusians and the three Earthman staggered up the sticky slope, their feet sinking deep into the quaggy grey soil. Once they reached the cargo lock, however, Durfee ordered the mixer set down.

"Go get your tobacco, Volcano," ordered Captain Durfee. "About a pound for each man. And give them five of those necklaces you've been making of plastic bottle tops."

"Lucky I had another four pounds of tobacco stored away," said Volcano half an hour later as they eased the mixer down upon its permanent mountings in the engine room. "Those Frogs cleaned out the rest of it."

Brand chuckled, choked and then snorted loudly again. "You'll be sucking a dry pipe this flight, Volcano," he said. "I used that extra tobacco you had hidden to smoke out the vallids."

Volcano lunged at the squatty spaceman, his long legs tripping over the rollers they had used in transporting the mixer from the cargo lock. He sprawled into Brand, knocking him down too. They rolled over and over on the deck, the waterproof strips of the mixer's protective envelope tangling around them stickily. Brand's fists thudded meatily into

Volcano's skinny ribs, and the lanky cook's sharp elbows jabbed savagely into Brand's sides and face.

Durfee reached down and jerked the two men apart. He grinned boyishly, his face shedding for the moment the dour lines gained in the preceding gloomy four years.

"Won't you ever grow up?" he demanded. "Go out and get some nik-nik leaves, Volcano. You used to smoke them before you started growing your own tobacco."

Volcano growled something under his breath and headed for the galley.

"Let's get this mixer hooked up tonight, Brand," said Durfee, "so if we have to blast off in the forenoon, after Myra leaves for work, we'll be ready to go."

"Only," he paused and his dark eyes were pained. "Don't tell her we're ready to leave. Let her think she's going with us."

But with the steaming morning light of the hidden sun I knew that Myra was destined to go with us on our mad flight into outer space. For, from the mile-distant barrier that surrounded the spaceport, a column of armed Frogs and revolting colonists was marching raggedly toward us.

I tried to warn Volcano as he worked over his stove in the galley, but the creaking of a slightly loosened girder and the rattle of an electrical cable beneath my deck could carry no message to the lanky old cook's hairy ears.

He was grumbling as he sucked at his empty pipe, and when he put down a dish he landed it with an emphatic slam. And the party of rebellious Venusians was slogging steadily nearer.

Captain Peter Durfee was working over a chart in the navigation blister. A filing cabinet was bolted to the deck behind him and I fought the worn bolt that secured its left corner. Suddenly the metal parted and Durfee's head snapped up with the sound. His eyes glanced momentarily outside, as I had hoped they would, and he saw the shadowy outlines of the approaching force.

He snapped over the worn switch of the intercommunication system and pressed the little red stud in its side. The staccato buzz of the general alarm echoed through the metal hollowness of my four hundred feet of rusting metal—the signal to prepare to abandon ship, or prepare for crash landing.

"Brand!" he barked into the mouthpiece, "we've got to unplug the main jets. Don't bother with the auxils; we can

remove them in space if the cold doesn't shrink them enough to drop out. I'll take care of the braking jets in the bow.

"Volcano!" He waited for the cook's reply. "There's a party of Venusians coming. Get one of the converted gas rifles and cover me when I try to free the braking jets. Don't shoot to kill; we're on their side only they don't know it."

Under his breath Durfee cursed as he snapped off the switch. If only he had insisted that Myra Lacey get a room in Tular City, rather than keep on living aboard . . .

He slipped into his plastic mud gear and ran out of my forward lock, a hammer and short pointed bar in his hands. Quickly he drove the bar into one of my sealed tubes with a rap of the hammer and jerked at the plug. With a plop the plug came free, and he hurried on to my next braking jet.

Ten of the twelve jets in my blunt bow were free when the Venusians came within range. They came forward then at the double, their flame blasts breathing searing yellow jets, and their paralyzing lectros snapping and crackling as their invisible bolts of energy lashed out at Durfee. Pale nik-nik brush and the pulpy purple-veined vines of thidin blackened and withered all around Durfee but the young spacer doggedly worked away at his task of clearing the jets.

The cough of a gas gun, one of the ancient rifles equipped with a pressure tank of rocket fuel instead of utilizing water-hungry gunpowder, sounded then, and sudden bursts of explosive bullets threw up jets of mud in the attackers' faces. They hugged the ground, slithering quickly into the water-filled depressions that would afford some measure of protection. Old Volcano Manby was in action at last.

Durfee cleared the last two jets quickly, and jumping down from the half-rotten scaffolding of poles that reached almost to my forward control blister, he raced back toward the main driving jets. From there had come the fog-muffled sounds of battle.

A party of frogs had circled down along the swamp and come by boat to take Brand by surprise from the rear. The jets were clear, but Brand crouched behind a spongy fallen log while the Frogs poured a barrage of flame at his shelter. Steam poured upward, but as yet Brand was untouched.

Captain Durfee shouted as he rounded the blunt swell of my side, tugging at the rebuilt old revolver, also gas-operated, in his waterproof holster. The Frogs lost all stomach for battle as

he poured explosive bullets in their general direction, and they headed back toward the swamp.

"Let's go, Brand!" shouted Durfee yanking at the dazed oldster's shoulder.

Brand weaved to his feet, sweat pouring down his face and soaking his ragged pink moustache. He blinked his one good eye. Steam was yet pouring from his patched mudalls.

"Broiled like a lobster," he whispered hoarsely. "Broiled alive."

Durfee fed a warming blast into my jets. I felt new life quiver through my ancient frame, and I sensed the insidious tug of the swamp mud at my lower plates. Volcano climbed down from the upper blister where he had been holding off the attackers and hurried into my galley. There were loose dishes to be battened down before the takeoff. And Myra Lacey strapped herself into one of the worn pressure seats in my control room ready for the initial shock of the blast-off.

"First pancakes in two months," grumbled Volcano, champing savagely at his lifeless pipe, "and we can't eat 'em."

"I hope that number five doesn't blow," muttered Brand uneasily as he checked the gauges deep down in my vitals, "we patched her up as best we could but . . ."

"Ready, darling?" asked Durfee as he sent another, hotter, blast roaring out into the sticky dankness of the mudlands.

"Any time," smiled Myra. She bit her lip. "Blast off," she said, "any time you're ready, Peter."

"Volcano—Brand," Durfee said crisply into the intercom mouthpiece, "blasting off."

His hand tugged downward gently on the controls that linked with the mixer. The blasting of my jets deepened and steadied. I quivered and fought back at the hungry fingers of the swamp. The slimy mud slipped suddenly from my rusty old plates and the rotted scaffolding at my bow crumpled as I surged skyward at an almost horizontal angle.

Steering jets thundered at Durfee's trained touch. I curved upward more steeply, the endless clouds of Venus smothering all vision of what lay behind us. I felt a main drive tube explode, but I bored onward. I was empty, my cargo bins hollow and my fuel tanks less than a third full. When I was younger three jets could have carried me beyond the tug of Venusian gravity.

"We'll chart a course about Venus," Durfee was saying breathlessly, "that will make the *Janelace* a satellite. Then

when the Earth fleet comes within range of my radio beam we can warn them."

He smiled rather grimly at Myra. "That's providing the *Janelace* holds together long enough to reach such an orbit," he added.

And at that moment, as the secondary cloud envelope of Venus thinned and the sun shone through, I felt my plates grinding and my inner girders twisting. The stress of the blastoff, and now the sudden decrease in the outer atmospheric pressure on my weakened structure, was too much for me. Great sections of my skin ripped free. Air hissed out through a thousand rents, and automatic doors clanged shut. Alarm lights blinked. Buzzers went mad.

The control room was intact, and down in the tube room Brand was clamping shut the helmet of one of the two space-suits hanging there. He yelled through the intercom that he was all right.

"How about you, Volcano?" Durfee asked.

He heard a connected string of warmly purple space oaths. "I'll be okay," he roared, "if these pancakes hold out."

"Pancakes!" gasped Captain Durfee blankly.

"Yep." The sound of teeth grinding on a pipestem was plainly audible. "I'm plastering them on the leaks. They freeze fast as the air pressure squeezes 'em through."

Durfee laughed. "Once we hit our orbit we'll rig up some low pressure patches and link the galley and the control room together. Until then keep the pancakes working."

"Yes, sir!" agreed Volcano emphatically. "I will!"

A matter of twenty four hours later a cruiser out near Lunar, pirate-patrolling, answered Captain Durfee's beamed radio call, and a rescue ship, a freighter, headed in our direction. The warning of the Venusian rebels' trap was relayed to Earth by means of a speedy two-man jetter. And word was flashed back along Durfee's beam that Venus had been granted autonomy only three days before by the World Union! Their rebellion had been needless!

The unshielded sun of space felt good on my old plates. There was no relentless drag of gravity here to warp and strain my weary framework. Drowsily I heard Captain Durfee and Myra, talking with their heads very close together.

"The beam will make you wealthy," Myra was saying.

"You can buy another freighter and we'll recommission the *Janelace*. We'll show Planetary Trading we're a long way from being licked."

Durfee shook his head. His arm tightened around Myra. "No, dear," he said. "The *Janelace* has made her last voyage. We're going to hook a solar reflector on her and leave her here to circle Venus eternally. She's earned that."

"We'll come out to visit her occasionally, and we'll tell our grandchildren how she averted war between Earth and Venus."

Down in the galley Brand laughed and slapped a stubby-fingered hand against his bowlegs. Volcano snarled, his pipe bobbling angrily. The smell of the nik-nik leaves made both their eyes water.

"A filthy habit," said Brand soberly, wagging his head. "A filthy habit." He pawed savagely at his pink moustache, and his eyes leaked moisture. . . .

The sun, shielded from me so long by the cloud-shell of Venus, felt good on my old plates. The chill of space crept in and the sunlight routed it as I slowly revolved. I dreamed of the voyages I had made in those dimming years. Long forgotten faces of the crews that had lived, and fought, and worked between my decks grew more vivid as I drifted there, inert and weightless.

Space had claimed me at last.

—Basil Wells



THE GATES OF PEARL

by David Mason

*A space station, of all places, should
be off limits to unauthorised personnel
—especially when they're dead !*

Henry Gordon closed the rubber-gasketed door marked ASTROPHYSICS SECTION 22 behind him, and went to the panel. He checked the clock settings that drove the telescope and changed the plate holder. For a moment he stopped to look out through the tiny viewport at the deep black of space outside, spangled with unblinking stars. Henry was still a little new to life on the Orbit Station ; it would be a long time before he could look at the outside view without excitement.

He turned away, and started for the safety door.

At that moment, Athalie Gordon (1919-1972) entered through the solid steel bulkhead at Henry Gordon's right elbow, and walked through the other wall, outward, in the general direction of the constellation of Bootes. Henry had been only a child in 1972, but he remembered his aunt quite well. He also remembered that she was definitely dead.

She was wearing her good dark serge, the one she had worn often before that unfortunate attack of flu. Her expression was much more relaxed than Henry Gordon ever remembered

it to have been, and she appeared to be consulting a road map as she walked through.

Henry Gordon, shuddering slightly, kept a firm grip on the star plates as he closed the door behind him. He walked down the passage, his magnetic shoes clanking firmly on the floor, to the Developing Section, where he left the plates. He then proceeded to Personnel, where he filed an immediate request for return to Earth and a resignation on account of ill-health, forms 2234 and 7166, in triplicate.

After this, Henry Gordon had a fit of shrieking nerves, and managed, in spite of Service Rule 22, to get disgustingly drunk.

"Now, sergeant, I'm not trying to refuse you your permanent transfer if you really want it that way." Doctor Vanderdecken smiled in a paternal manner. "Everybody wants you boys in our most difficult branch of service to be happy. If it's a little too tough for you out there . . ."

"I didn't say that, doctor." The bulldog face of the sergeant showed some irritation.

Thought that would get a rise out of you, the doctor thought. He said aloud, "Well, you say right here on your request form that you feel you might get sick if you continued to remain on Orbit Station duty."

"That's what I meant, doctor," the sergeant repeated doggedly. "Sick. You know, funny in the head. I feel fine right now, and I'm going to stay that way. That's why I put in for a transfer. That's why I'm not going to go up again if I can help it."

The doctor exhaled slowly, tapping his teeth with a pencil. He increased the fatherly tone a little.

"Sergeant, what it amounts to is this. We need men like you, men that we've had to train for this special duty. That's the first space station in history up there ; you men are making history. Some day there will be more stations, there'll be rockets going to other worlds and we'll need you for that job too. Now, if a good man like yourself is going to give up before the job's even properly started, what do you expect the Army's going to think about that?"

The sergeant remained silent.

"What I'd like to know, sergeant," the doctor resumed, "is simply this : have you got any really good reason for

wanting to transfer? You can trust me; believe me, you'll get your transfer anyway, and we need to know."

The sergeant pulled very thoughtfully at his slightly cauliflowered ear. He knitted his brows. Then he shook his head.

"I just don't want to get sick in the head. And I haven't any other reason. If I had, I'd be really buckin' for a Section 8, so let's leave it that way, hey, doc?"

Dr. Vanderdecken shrugged, and reached for the pen. He scrawled "Approved for transfer" on the sergeant's form, and silently waved him out.

"That was the fourth one this month," Vanderdecken said, slumping further down in the big chair. Young Dr. Prior, the newest man in the Centre, had been listening as respectfully as became his junior status. He had also been losing his fourth chess game to Dr. Vanderdecken. Prior was an excellent psychologist in more ways than one, and he was also a very good chess player.

"Ghosts?" Prior said. "Your move, incidentally, doctor."

"Ghosts," Dr. Vanderdecken said, studying the board. "They keep walking through the space station. Certainly, I know it's nonsense. So do the station personnel. So, when they ask to be transferred out, they give every reason but that one. That's the reason, though."

Vanderdecken moved, and Prior carefully placed a rook in mortal danger. Then he asked, "If that's the reason, but they don't mention it, how do you know? Have you been there, up on the station?"

"No, no, of course not. I don't have to go up there to know. The first five or six that asked for transfers gave that as their reason. We had to have a couple of them committed and the others got psycho discharges, of course." Vanderdecken moved, obstinately missing the rook. "But of course, that's made the rest of the station personnel a little suspicious of us."

"Foolish of them," Prior commented, absently. He regarded the board, realizing regretfully that he would have to win this one. "But what's your theory, doctor?"

"Oh, it's easy enough to understand. The cultural complex contains the basic idea of Heaven being in the sky, and the dead going there. And, in addition, there's the lack of normal gravity, the unusual environment . . . all that sort of thing.

It's a neurosis. But stopping it's the big problem. We need a full crew on duty up there, all the time. We've tried sending professed atheists up, but we stopped that. The first four of those went completely out of phase with reality after they saw their first ghosts."

Vanderdecken moved, exposing his king from three different directions. Prior studied the board, and decided to stretch it out one more move or two.

"Saw ghosts, doctor?" Prior asked. "I should think an atheist wouldn't have that particular delusion."

"Cultural syndrome, my boy," Vanderdecken said. "Read Jung. Common underminer. Of course, trained scientific men like ourselves wouldn't be likely to see anything. If we did, it wouldn't mean that these superstitious notions had any basis. Just that we had—well, weakened a bit."

"What do these ghosts do, anyway, that disturb the men so much?" Prior asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all. They don't even seem to notice the men or the station itself. They just walk straight through it."

"Oh, gosh, doctor. I'm afraid you've given away the game there," Prior said, moving his bishop. "Check and mate, I think. But it's almost certainly a complete accident; you're a very much better player than I am."

Vanderdecken gazed at the board. "Umm. Yes, I think you have it. Well."

"Tell me, doctor, what is the upper echelon going to do about all these transfers, anyway?"

"Eh?" Vanderdecken looked up. "Oh, well, I've been told to return any of those transferring to duty on the station after a two-week rest. Unless there's a really valid reason, of course. But the top brass isn't going to put up with any more 'sick' transfers. No, sir. Matter of fact, I've got one now, a young scientist on the civilian staff, name of Gordon. Going to ship him right back in a week, though he doesn't know it yet."

"Gordon?" Prior asked. "Henry Gordon, in astronomy?"

"That's the one. Do you know him?"

"Went to school together. I know him very well." Prior looked puzzled. "Why, I ran into him a few months ago,

just before he took the station job. Do you mean to tell me he's been seeing ghosts? Why, he's the most unimaginative..."

Dr. Vanderdecken chuckled. "He didn't say he had, but he muttered a long tale about having stolen some money from an aunt of his when he was ten, and feeling that he wasn't honest enough to work for the government. Excuses, naturally"

"So you're returning him to duty, doctor?"

"Of course; he signed a contract, and the government's going to hold him to it. Another game, doctor?"

In Power Section, Quadrant Two, an engineer was checking gauges on the giant sun-heated boilers. As a pair of children ran happily, but inaudibly, out of the face of the boiler and into the solid mass of pipes, he checked off three more readings. Instinctively, he moved aside to let the next one pass, an emaciated man who muttered and pulled at his hair as he walked through. Otherwise, the engineer paid no attention. He had been seeing them for a long time now, but he was a devout Presbyterian. He had expected to see them, and was not surprised.

The only thing that really gave the engineer any feeling of disturbance was the occasional presence of a clerical collar among the passing crowds that wandered idly through. The occasional bearded, skull-capped orthodox Jew did not trouble him, but the presence of Papists, up here, did.

"My name is Prior—Doctor Prior," the young man said, extending his hand. "Medical Centre asked me to come up here, to see if there's anything can be done about some of your personnel problems. You're Doctor Welty, I presume?"

"That's right," the grey man said, shaking hands limply. "You're an M.D., I hope, Prior?"

"Certainly, Doctor," Prior smiled. "Not one of the lay psychoanalysts. You've probably received notice of my coming up, then?"

"Oh, sure." The grey man closed the dispensary door, and sat down. "Take a chair. You'll find the whisky just behind you."

"But regulations . . ."

"You'll need it," the grey man advised him.

Six thousand miles below, Henry Gordon sat at his desk and carefully reread his notice of refusal of transfer. When he had finished the last sentence, which said “. . . in view of the above mentioned contract, we find that you still have fourteen months to remain on duty,” he put the letter down. He opened the desk drawer and took out a Smith and Wesson calibre .32, five-chambered, single action revolver.

Henry Gordon then shot himself in the head, once.

Prior poured a small drink, studying the other doctor carefully. Obviously the neurosis was present, but a trace of alcoholism was also there. This man would have to be recommended for transfer, for the good of the profession. As for the ghosts . . .

Susanna Smedley (1948-1981) trotted hastily through the room, bisecting the examination table in her arrowlike passage.

Prior spilled what was left in his glass. Dr. Welty refilled it for him.

“I imagine you occasionally have a little trouble with—well, slight optical effects?” Prior asked, trying not to look at the bulkhead.

The grey man chuckled, grimly. “Ghosts, you mean?”

“Well now, doctor, if the men call them that . . .”

“Call them that? That’s what they are. Son, you’re sitting in the midst of the Great Beyond. The population of the heavens is continually walking through here, back and forth. And . . . and a drink’s what I need.” He took one, quickly.

Prior laughed, a little hollowly. “Come, now, doctor. We’re both too intelligent to fall prey to superstition—ulp.”

He looked down at the table, but it was hard not to notice Elwell Thompson (1834-1863). The grey man chuckled.

“Superstition, doctor,” Prior continued. “I realize you people up here are having some sort of difficulty, but I’m sure it can be worked out on a scientific basis. I can’t see that these things we see—you do see them, too, don’t you, doctor?”

The grey man nodded. “I see ’em, all right.”

“Well. Now, there’s no reason to think these are the spirits of the dead. Gravity may have something to do with it, or possibly—well, there’s a fantastic idea which I’d still consider preferable to any pseudo-religious notions. Just suppose that

these are some sort of projections which the Russians have rigged up to keep us from making a real success of . . . oop."

Prior stared up into the pale, slightly transparent features of Henry Gordon, still carrying the impress of a .32-calibre slug. He walked slowly through the room, wearing a felt hat tipped back on his bullet-pierced head. Prior knew the hat; Henry had worn it all through college. He had been quite attached to it.

In the middle of the room, Henry stopped, and looked back at Prior. He lifted the hat politely and stepped out through the wall, walking in the general direction of the Lesser Pleiades.

"Must be a friend of yours," Doctor Welty said. "Never saw one of them take any notice of us before . . . hey. Now, what's the matter with you, anyway?"

—David Mason

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