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E. C. Tubb

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**THE  
SILENT  
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# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2 No. 10

1959

## New Long Complete Stories

### *Short Novels :*

#### **GALACTIC DESTINY**

**E. C. Tubb 4**

The Folk crewed the starships—People were only passengers and never the twain should meet. Until a disastrous accident in No-Space altered the circumstances.

#### **THE SILENT INVADERS Calvin M. Knox 54**

Unbeknown to its inhabitants Earth was a vital battleground for two opposing galactic forces. The protagonists both wanted Earth on their side for the final conflict.

### *Short Story :*

#### **CALL THEM EARTHMEN N. K. Hemming 91**

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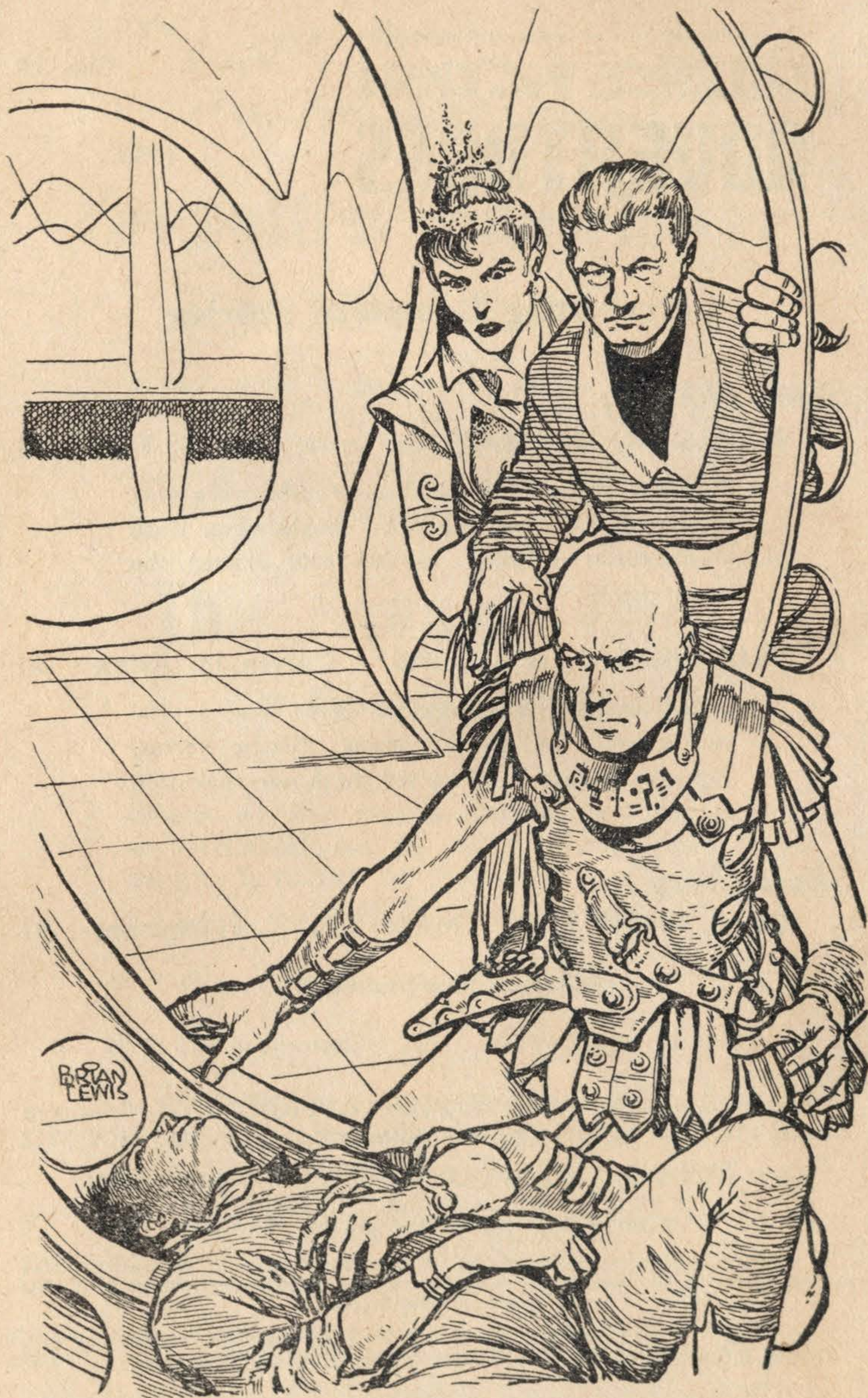
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*Author E. C. (Ted) Tubb is undoubtedly one of the most popular post-war writers to arise from the ranks of the celebrated "London Circle"—a weekly gathering of professionals and amateurs all interested in science fiction. He already has many feature-length stories to his credit, the foremost probably being his novel "Alien Dust." Here then is a new short novel from him packed with all the exciting drama and suspense we normally expect.*

# GALACTIC DESTINY

by E. C. TUBB

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*Illustrated by LEWIS*

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## Chapter 1

It was time for Completing the Log, the last Task of the arbitrary day. Jak reached for the thick volume, inscribed the date and time then paused, stylo in hand, his eyes on First Mate Sar where she sat before the tell-tales.

"All well, Sar?"

"All well, Captain."

He nodded, wrote the hieroglyphic which meant 'Ship functioning at optimum level, morale high, nothing to report,' drew a thick line beneath the entry, closed the book, replaced it on its rack and leaned back with a sense of completion.

It was always the same at the end of a day. Another segment of time and distance had been safely covered, a challenge met and conquered and the smooth routine of the ship could commence another cycle. He glanced at his watch, it lacked



a few minutes to the time of Captain's Walk of Inspection, he decided not to waste them.

"Sar!"

"Captain?"

She turned from the tell-tales, the tiny lights throwing her strong-boned face into high relief. With her cropped hair and utilitarian uniform of sober grey she could have been his brother. People had often fallen into that error, wondering, perhaps, why the youngest should have held the higher command.

"Sister," he said deliberately. "You are troubled. Why?"

"I have no trouble, Jak." Now that he had set the pattern formality could be dropped. He smiled at her and shook his head.

"I said that you were troubled, not that you had trouble. Don't argue like People."

"No, Jak."

"Is it Ric?"

"Ric is a good boy," she said quickly, too quickly. "There is nothing wrong with him."

She spoke in Ship-Talk, a language in which much could be said in a word, and because of this he sensed more than she told.

"He is a good boy," he agreed. "But he is young."

"Not too young to know the duties of the Folk."

"True."

Jak studied her for a moment, wondering whether to press the point, then decided against it. Ric was Sar's only child and it was natural for her to defend him. But there was trouble there, Jak could sense it, it would do no harm to keep an eye on the boy. It was a pity that he had no father.

He glanced at his watch again, time was getting short. He rose, straightened his uniform then glanced expectantly towards the door at the sound of a knock. He frowned as the panel remained shut. The frown deepened as the knock was repeated. Folk would have knocked and entered. People would have knocked and waited but People were not allowed in this part of the ship. Jak shouted a summons.

"Enter!"

First Engineer Lor entered the control room. He was followed by one of the People. Jak looked at the man, mentally hunting for his name and profession. Smith the Cleric from Earth. He stared at Lor.



"Trouble?"

"No, Captain." The First Engineer was obviously ill at ease. "It is this man, sir. He has made a request that he be allowed to look over the ship."

"I see." It was an unusual request and Jak could understand Lor's attitude. People just didn't want to examine the vessels in which they were passengers and, even if they did, Folk had no inclination to cater to their wishes. Not that it was against the ritual, not forbidden, that is, but it simply wasn't done.

"I thought it best that he see you, sir." Lor was apologetic.

"Insistent?"

"Yes, sir. Very."

Jak nodded. Only once before had he permitted a man of the People to see over his vessel. That had been a Sociologist, an old man who had later written a paper on the mores and customs of the Folk. He had sent Jak a copy which he hadn't bothered to read. But the Sociologist had had a reason. This man?

"Why do you want to see over the ship?" Jak dropped into Interspatial; few People could understand Talk.

"I am interested, sir."

"I am the Captain," said Jak. "Interested? Only that?"

"Yes, Captain. I realise that I am asking a great favour but I hope that you will be able to see your way clear to grant it."

"Curiosity," snorted Lor in Talk. "Can you beat it?"

Jak didn't answer. He stared at Smith and was intrigued by what he saw.

Smith was an old, small wisp of a man. He wore peculiar clothing of black and affected a band of white around his throat. He was, so his papers proclaimed, a Cleric but just what that was Jak had no idea. He was a quiet man and utterly nondescript but for his eyes. He had wide eyes; eyes which were alive with seeing and not just looking. The rest of him was nothing, a mere shadow, but his eyes were like two sponges absorbing everything they saw.

"Please, Captain." His voice held a note of pleading. Jak made his decision.

"You may accompany me," he said. "Walk not less and not more than two feet at my side. Touch nothing."

"Yes, Captain." Smith was pathetically grateful.



He had never seen anything quite like it before. He had seen a part of the ship, of course ; the cabins, the lounge, the dining room, but the inner workings of the vessel had remained a mystery. He walked discreetly beside Jak, not knowing that he was accompanying him on Captain's Walk of Inspection, not realising just how great was the favour extended to him. And, as he walked, his eyes drank in what they saw.

"Hydroponics." Jak waved a hand. "Algae plant which reprocesses the air and provides food if necessary." He halted as a uniformed technician came up to him ; the sound of Talk vibrated with a clean, crisp precision.

Smith looked about the compartment. It was big and clean and terribly bright. Tanks of green algae swirled to the impact of hidden pumps and artificial sunlight blazed down on the seething contents. Pipes snaked from the ceiling and the whirr of blowers, the sighing whine of fans filled the place with murmuring vibration. The technician glanced at Smith.

"Interested," said Jak, anticipating the question. "Such curiosity among People is rare."

"Yes, Captain."

"You don't approve, Vin?"

"It is not for me to approve or disapprove, Captain."

"All well, Vin?"

"Yes, Captain."

Jak continued his Walk. Through the kitchens, the Folk recreation room, the Folk quarters, the tiny sick bay with its conglomeration of instruments for electro-medtherapy. He unsealed the double doors of the hold and passed within. He checked and sealed the doors behind him. He was hardly conscious of Smith's presence.

Smith didn't mind. He followed the Captain like a dog, eyes everywhere. He touched nothing but the caress of his eyes was as if he fondled everything he saw. He burned with a hundred questions but, aside from a too-brief word of explanation, Jak volunteered nothing. He was not, Smith knew, being rude. It was just that he was so familiar with every part of the vessel that it never occurred to him that anyone could feel at a loss.

"Engine room." Jak paused at the door. Lor had returned to duty and he glanced at his mate, eyebrows lifted in resignation.



"Watch it," he said to Con. "You know what curiosity did?"

"What?"

"You mean that you don't know?" Con winked lecherously. "Well, I was curious about you, remember?"

Con flushed. She was heavy with child. Jak had heard the by-play but chose to ignore it. It was impolite to use Talk before People but in this case he was glad of it. Smith didn't look the type of man who would appreciate Lor's humour. Jak could hardly appreciate it himself. Married couples, he assumed, had their own language just as the Folk did. Maybe, one day, he would learn it for himself.

"You know how the drive works, of course," he said to Smith.

"No, Captain."

"No?" Jak could hardly believe it. Such ignorance! Even the youngest of the Folk knew the basic principles of the Vortiski drive.

"I'm afraid not." Smith gave his gentle smile.

"Well, you know that ships don't travel in normal space. If they did they would be restricted to the speed of light. It would take at least one year to travel one light-year. Objective time, that is, not subjective. Subjective time would be much less." He looked hard at the Cleric. "You understand me?"

"A little. You mean that to a person waiting on a planet it would take, say, four years for a ship to travel four light-years."

"At least. To the crew, of course, it wouldn't seem that long. They would be living on subjective time—relative time." Jak made an impatient gesture. "Surely you can follow that?"

"I think so. Yes, I think I can."

"Right. So we can't use normal space. For one thing it would be hopeless for business."

For a moment he was afraid that he would even have to explain that but Smith came to his rescue.

"I follow. Even though the crew would be under subjective time the ship would still take years, a lifetime even to make a journey. To a person on a planet, that is."

"Exactly. If you sent a cargo to a star twenty-light years distant it would take forty years for the double journey. You can't make a profit that way."

"No. I see that."



"So we use the Vortiski drive. We don't stay in normal space at all. We lift from a planet, engage the Vortiski drive and enter No-Space. We travel until we arrive where we want to go and then emerge in normal space again. The journey, apparently, has taken no time at all. To a person on a planet, that is."

"But not to us in the ship?"

"Of course not. We take about a hundred hours to cover one parsec. You know what a parsec is?"

"About three light-years, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Now tell him some of the other facts of life." Lor turned a grinning face from where he stood checking the power flux of the engine room. "Quick! Before he asks you if bigger ships are faster."

He had used Interspatial. Smith had understood.

"All ships travel at the same velocity in No-Space," explained Jak resignedly. "Extra drive units do not affect that. The Vortiski drive gets you into No-Space, it doesn't push you through it."

Detachedly he wondered what his old instructor would have had to say about his explanation. He would probably have burst a blood vessel. Old Captain Ku had believed in cold science and the purity of mathematics.

"I follow." Smith seemed uncertain. "At least I think I understand."

Jak doubted it.

"But it would seem logical that with larger engines the speed would be increased."

"The velocity is the same," assured Jak.

"I see."

He wasn't convinced, Jak knew that, but then he would never be convinced. He was bound by planetary usages; larger, bigger, faster, things which had an entirely different meaning in space. Jak sought for an analogy and couldn't find one. He could have likened travelling in No-Space to scraps of driftwood riding a mighty ocean current, the speed of the current being the same for anything that rode it. Perhaps Smith would have grasped the analogy but Jak was unable to use it. He had no concept of an ocean current and, even if he had, he would never have likened ships in space to any-



thing planetary. His entire being would have revolted against it.

Jak glanced at his watch as they left the engine room and lengthened his stride a little quashing a momentary irritation that this particular Walk of Inspection should be taking so long. Despite his haste he did not relax his vigilance. His eyes, ears, nostrils, the soles of his feet, his very skin quivered in tune to the vessel around him. Had anything been amiss he would have known it, sensing it no matter how minor the fault, aware of wrongness before his trained skill could have determined what it was.

Nothing was wrong. This Walk of Inspection was as the one before and the one before that and others as far back as he could remember. He had a good ship and a good crew and perfection was only to be expected. Then he remembered Smith and realised that, in one particular at least, this Walk was different from others.

"Almost over," he said. He had neglected the man, yet Jak hated to be considered impolite.

"It has been most enjoyable." Smith's eyes seemed even larger than normal as he stared about him. His black clothing and the stupid band of white were incongruous against the shining metal and utilitarian furnishings of the ship. Why did he wear them?

"It is because of my profession," he said in reply to Jak's cautiously worded question. "It is a very old uniform."

"You do not consider me impolite?"

"How can you say that, Captain?" Smith gave his gentle smile. "Can I blame you for being curious when I have so much curiosity myself? Please do not hesitate to ask whatever may be in your mind."

"Your profession. Cleric. What is a Cleric?"

"One who teaches Christianity."

"So?" Jak frowned. "I have never heard of it."

"It is a very old profession," said Smith. "I am not surprised." He sensed the other's frustration. "The Brotherhood of Man?"

"No." Jak hadn't heard of that either but it had a disturbing sound. "Is that what you teach?"

"In a way, yes. It is a very old teaching and a man died because he originated it. My profession is named after that man."

"Cleric?"



"No. Christianity. A man who believes in certain concepts, among them the Brotherhood of Man, is a Christian."

"And you teach these ethics?"

"Humbly, yes."

"Why humbly?"

"Because a Christian is humble. He recognises the existence of a far greater power than himself. He believes in the existence of God."

"I too believe in powers greater than myself," said Jak.

"Electricity for one. Atomic flux for another. Is that God?"

"No. What you speak of is but a part of the universe. God is greater than the universe."

"The universe is infinite. Can you have something greater than infinity?" Jak was being ironic. Smith, to his surprise, took him seriously.

"Yes."

"God?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see this God," said Jak dryly. Smith made a gesture with his hands.

"You are confusing material things with things of the spirit. No one, no human, is capable of grasping the concept of something so great. The best we can do is to try and understand a part. It is this knowledge of inadequacy which makes us humble."

Jak did not like to feel humble. He was Captain, master of the ship and a leader among the Folk and there was no cause to feel humble in that. Proud, yes, but not humble. Why, if he felt humble it would almost be the same as feeling ashamed!

And this Brotherhood of Man. Jak pondered it as he strode along. Smith meant, he supposed, that everyone was equal and technically brothers. But any fool could see that it just wasn't so. Planets had their rulers and their serfs, were they equal? Were they brothers? Folk were different, of course. Folk, despite Captains and First Officers were truly brothers under the skin. But Smith was saying that Star-Folk and Planet-People were the same.

He was, Jak thought, a little insane. He hoped that he wouldn't let his mania get out of hand.



## Chapter II

It was nearing the Period of Grace ; the time when Folk mingled with People to talk, to smile, to explain, perhaps, some detail of the journey. On the very large ships the ritual had dwindled to a mere formality for the large ships carried many crew and more than a token mingling was impractical. But on the smaller vessels the old ways still held even though, at times, the reasons for their being seemed very remote and almost unreal. But Jak would have been the last to question their wisdom.

Sar waited for him in the control room. She was, he noted, still worried though she hid it well. Perhaps he should have a talk to Ric, sound him out. A boy like that needed a man to talk to and he was of an age to be impressed by a Captain even if he would ignore an uncle.

"Did you have a pleasant Walk?"

"Interesting." He told her about what Smith had said. "A most unusual profession. He must come from a very isolated planet."

"Beta Sagittarius?"

"We picked him up there. He had travelled far before he joined us."

"He seems a harmless man. Harmless and somehow gentle, not womanish, but gentle. I am glad that you let him accompany you."

"Why?"

"He seemed to want it so much."

"Is wanting reason for giving?" Was there something else here? Something to do with Ric?

"If the giving does no harm, yes."

"Poor logic, Sar. If Ric wants to be Captain, do I stand down?" He watched her closely but there was no reaction. She looked at him, a smile touching her lips.

"Poor logic, brother? Yours is poorer. I said give if the giving does no harm. To give an inexperienced boy command would be harm enough. Harm to the ship and to the Folk. Harm to the boy also. Forced growth is never good."

"True, but try to make any youngster admit it."

Jak remembered his own impatience at the slow, too slow promotion when he was a boy. Now, of course, he could see how unfitted he had been for the simplest command but, at the time, he had known bitterness.



He crossed to the control panel, ran his experienced eye over the tell-tales then lifted his head and stared at the screens. They revealed nothing but the featureless blue-greyness of No-Space. He touched a control and the blankness of the screen writhed into uneasy life. Splotches of colour dotted the surface, the concentric rings of stellar spectrums, the rings themselves pulsing in irregular rhythms. He returned the control to neutral, the extended scanner which had been forced into normal space ceased draining power. Needles swung to their normal position.

"Well, Jak?" ..

"Well."

He forced himself to meet her stare, the subtle inflexions of Talk telling him that she was more than surprised that he had used so much power merely in order to make an idle test. Or did she suspect that it had been no test but just the indulgence of a whim? Both were wrong. He had exercised his right because of things long past. He had thought himself a boy again and had reminded himself that he was Captain.

Sar picked up a record book, flipped the pages, more for effect than because she didn't know what was written on the foil.

"A matter of Folk business, Captain."

He glanced at his wrist, there was still time before the Period of Grace.

"Yes?"

"Lan has requested a transfer."

"Reason?"

"Wishes marriage. We have no suitable females on the ship and he wants to join the Folk on a larger vessel."

Jak nodded, the reason was sound. He would regret losing the young man but that couldn't be helped.

"Notify Folkholme of the request and determine any ships willing to take him."

"And if no immediate vessels?"

"Ships are always building. He can tranship to Folkholme and stand by to form a complement." Jak permitted himself to smile. "It would be better for him to do that, he can find himself a mate while waiting."

"You will authorise his request then?"

"Naturally."

"Replacement?"



"Unnecessary, as you well know." He raised his eyebrows at Sar's expression. "We already carry a larger complement than a ship of this size really needs. With Con's child on the way a reduction is desirable in any case. We need no replacement." He paused then, casually, "Ric can take over Lan's duties."

He glanced at his wrist to avoid seeing the thankfulness in her eyes.

He heard the music as he approached the lounge; a strange, plaintive melody of sonorous chords and rippling grace notes. He stood listening to it for a moment then knocked once and without further ceremony entered the compartment.

Lelita the Aristo had caused the music. She sat, an ornamented multichord on her thighs, her heart-shaped face reposed, her long fingers caressing the buttons on the panel. Behind her, her Duenna seemed a gross parody of the womanhood she represented. She saw Jak and smiled, the music falling silent as she extended her hand.

"Captain! It is gracious of you to attend." Her eyes shifted to Sar. "Your First Mate was here before you. Her son much earlier."

"Impatience is an attribute of youth." Jak glanced at Ric where he sat on the carpeted floor at the feet of the girl. The boy wore an enraptured expression as if the music had aroused dreams and concepts alien to his normal world.

"Did you hear the music, Captain?" Sar, by accident or design, sat at the side of her son.

"For a moment only." Jak bowed to Lelita. "You play well."

"You are gracious to think so." She was young and though accustomed to flattery, susceptible to it. Vibration murmured through the air as her fingers stroked the panel. "Did the simple melody amuse you?"

"It seemed to have merit." Jak sat down. "An old tune?"

"Very old." Smugness echoed in her voice. "It was composed, so I understand, some two thousand years ago."

"So old?" Evelyn was not impressed. Glancing at her Jak gained the impression that the artist was inwardly amused at the antics of the young Aristo.

"So I understand."

"Oh, I do not doubt you." Evelyn shrugged. "A pity that tunes, like wine, do not always improve with keeping."



It was feline-sharp and Jak wondered at it. Evelyn was a mature woman and one, he would have thought, above such cattiness. He guessed at some secret bitterness between them.

"You would think that." Lelita was all smiles. "You compose a little yourself, perhaps?"

"A little."

"Then it must come as a shock to learn that your finest efforts are but the duplication of composers long dead."

"That," said Evelyn stiffly, "is surely a very personal point of view. I cannot see any great merit in turning myself into an inferior type of record player."

"Two thousand years ago," said Jak hastily. He could sense a quarrel brewing and wanted no part of it. "As old as that."

"Yes." Lelita was all smiles. Her hands rested on the panel. "I found an old recording and decided to add it to my repertoire." The muted thunder of *Greensleeves* filled the lounge. "It came from Earth."

"From Earth?" Elric, sitting further back, glanced at Smith. "Perhaps you know of it?"

"No." The Cleric listened a moment, his features vacant but for his eyes. "No, it is unfamiliar to me. But that is not surprising, much that originated on Earth is now forgotten by the planet which gave it birth."

"And that to which Earth gave birth has forgotten its origin?"

"Yes." If he felt bitterness the Cleric did not allow it to enter his voice. "It is sometimes difficult to remember that Earth was once the sole home of Mankind. Now it is all too easy to find men, whole planets even, to whom Earth is but a legend."

Was he aiming his words at Jak? The Captain didn't know but he felt a trace of annoyance with himself that he hadn't discovered the odd man's planet of origin. It would be on his papers, of course, but they remained in his personal possession. And, after all, what did it matter from where he originated? Still, Earth was something rather special in the ways of planets. Jak hadn't really realised that such a world actually existed. He must look it up in the Almanac when he had time.

"Poor Earth," sighed the Cleric. He recollected himself and glanced apologetically at Lelita. "I am impolite," he murmured. "Our gracious entertainer waits."



"Thank you." Lelita glanced at the others assembled in the lounge. Not all of them paid her attention. Deliberately she struck a harsh chord. "I will play the ancient melody again, then, if it so please you. I find it interesting though, I will admit, it need not be to everyone's taste."

With that Jak could agree. He, personally, found the tune cloying and softly unclean. Music composed and favoured by the Folk reflected their environment, sharp, conclusive, correct in its mathematical precision. But then, there were many things about People he did not find to his taste.

The melody ended, another followed immediately, a third and then a medley of tunes from a hundred worlds. Lelita was young, a dilettante, a spoiled Aristo, but she had a certain talent. She should, thought Jak, have been an Artist. The thought drew his eyes towards Evelyn. She sat, eyes half-closed, the supple fingers of her right hand tapping her thigh. She opened her eyes and looked directly at him.

"Bored, Captain?"

"No," he lied. Why was People music so cloying? "You?"

"Very much so." She spoke quietly, and yet not as if she were deliberately keeping her words from Lelita. "Repetition, to me, is always boring."

"Indeed?" Jak wondered if she grew bored with the necessity of eating or sleeping, or, for that matter, simply living. Life held much that was repetitious. She must have guessed his thoughts.

"You think that I am being affected? Displaying temperament?" She smiled. "That is not so."

"I did not think that."

"No?" Her smile told him that she both recognised and forgave the lie. "Small blame if you did." She glanced at Lelita. "The child plays well."

"She has talent."

"She has skill, not talent. If she had talent she would not be content to play the music composed by others, she would compose her own."

"She is not an Artist."

"That is so." Evelyn's fingers beat on her thigh. "But she is beautiful."

"She has a certain attraction," admitted Jak cautiously. He sensed more beneath her words than perhaps she intended.



"She goes to be wed," he said. "To the Manager of Thurgan's World."

"Hemish Longtheran?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"We have met." Her fingers beat harder on the smooth curve of her flesh. "I wish him all happiness."

"Yes."

Jak was uncomfortable. He had suddenly gained an insight as to what could have been the reason for the dislike of the Artist for the girl. She had known Hemish, had she been in love with him? It would account for the antipathy and the near-derision. But if she felt like that then why hadn't she hired a Hypmed to remove the hurtful memories?

Smith, sitting, his eyes huge in the white expanse of his face, turned as Elric touched his arm.

"You are thoughtful," said the Warrior. "Does the old music remind you of home?"

"No."

"Strange, I thought that perhaps it might." Elric glanced at the girl. "She is deft. She is to make a great marriage. She would be a good friend."

Smith was indifferent.

"She likes old tunes," murmured Elric. "Tell me, do you know of any other old tunes? From Earth, I mean?"

"None that I can remember." Smith glanced at the man at his side. "How did you feel about that old tune?"

"I liked it. There was something about it which reminded me of the sea or of a wind stirring a forest. Is Earth like that?"

"It used to be."

"We must talk further on the matter."

Elric sat back, his eyes brooding as he stared at Lelita. He was not a young man but his body was in excellent condition. His face was seamed with the thin white lines of scar tissue and had about it the deadness of inexpert plastic surgery. And yet that was not wholly the reason for his impassiveness. He was a Warrior and emotion, to him, was something to be buried deep beneath layers of imperturbability.

He stared at the girl. She was lovely, he thought, an animal, of course, but a lovely one. A trained feline filled with the consciousness of self, a typical product of her class. But, to him, she could be useful.



Manager Longtheran was an ambitious man and not one to whom the restrictions of a single world would appeal. Lelita could spur his ambition and turn his eyes to the planets surrounding his domain. A Combine was better than a Managership but a Combine could only be won by force of arms. If Lelita could be persuaded to remember his name and profession it could pay great dividends in the near future when Longtheran reached beyond his grasp.

Elric leaned back and dreamed of high position and the opportunity to once again play the cold, logical mathematically precise, wonderful game of war.

### Chapter III

Percheon did not dream of war. He was a Courier and he was in charge of five thousand vials of Courdray's Serum which rested in the refrigerated hold of the ship. It wasn't a large shipment but it was both expensive and vital. He worried about it.

"Everything all right with the ship, Captain?" He was a rough man, uncultured, possessing only an unswerving loyalty and a single-minded aim. He would deliver his charge or die trying. He could not know how he transgressed the mores of the Folk.

"Everything is well," said Jak stiffly. It strained him to be polite in the circumstances.

"Are we running to time, sir?"

"We are on schedule."

"I see." Percheon was sweating, his ebony skin glistening as though oiled. "Guess you think I'm a nuisance, Captain, but that serum's damn important to those men on Beta Tauri."

"So I understand."

"You can't understand the half of it, Captain. Either they get it or they die." The Courier snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

"You have nothing to fear." Jak was patient. "The ship is on schedule and progressing well."

"Sure." Percheon wiped his hands on the legs of his trousers. "Just thought that I'd ask, Captain. You know how it is."

Jak didn't bother to answer.



"Well—" Percheon shifted from one foot to the other. "Guess that's all, Captain."

Morrow grinned at him as he returned to his place.

"Well?"

"Everything's fine."

"That's not what I meant. How did he talk to you?"

"Fair enough."

"You think so?" Morrow shrugged. "Maybe you like being talked to that way. As if you were a child or a dog or a half-wit. Not me. But I warned you, you can't say that I didn't."

"He was fair." Percheon was stubborn. "We're on time and going well. He told me."

"What else could he say?" The Huckster shrugged. "I was watching him all the time. He looked to me just as if he'd tasted something bad. Damned if I'd risk being snubbed like that."

He was a big, plump, self-opinionated man and, in his own eyes, an important one. The presence of Folk disturbed him, made him feel somehow small and insignificant. They were so remote, so cold, so self-sufficient. Morrow didn't like to be made to feel uncomfortable. He took his revenge in spiteful ways.

"Look at the kid," he said. He jerked his head towards Ric. "He's got it bad."

"Yes?"

"Sure he has, just look at him." Morrow chuckled. "Damn near eating his heart out. I bet he'd give that girl the ship if it was his to give."

"She's pretty," said Percheon. "And he's young."

"That won't do him any good." Morrow glanced to where Jak was sitting, his face a blank wall. "The Folk are clannish, can't see why they should be but they are." He paused, frowning as if to resolve some inner doubt. "They haven't a thing," he said defiantly. "Just their ships and that's about all. Would you like to spend your entire life cooped up in a ship?"

"Haven't thought about it," said Percheon.

"Not that they'd let you even if you were willing."

"That so?"

"Sure. No doubt about it. You're either Folk or you're People. No mixing." Morrow scowled as if at a private



hurt. "Damn them anyway." He produced dice. "Let's play Bunco."

The rattle of the polyhedrons sounded harsh against the music.

Jak glanced towards Sar. Had she heard? Their eyes met and he knew that she had missed none of the conversation. Ears trained to distinguish the subtle note of a machine could not have avoided it. Was this the reason why she had been so upset?

Jak smiled at her. She was worried, naturally, but without cause. Ric was young, true, but not too young to know the truth of what Morrow had said. Between Folk and People was only a chasm; to even think of bridging it was to invite disaster. He turned his attention towards Evelyn. She was talking to Smith.

"Earth must have given birth to some great Artists," she was saying. "A primitive world like that sets up ideal conditions for the creative spirit. You are a very fortunate man."

"I am not an Artist."

"I know, but you must have met Artists, talked with them, seen their work."

"You have the wrong conception of Earth." Smith's voice was gentle, his tones polite. "It is an old planet and the fires are dying. The race is not what it was. There are museums, of course, reproductions of famous works, but that is about all. Even the great religions are but shadows of what they were."

"You must tell me about them some time." Evelyn pursued her own subject. "It is a fact that the artistic spirit is strongest where there are conditions of hardship. Now, in the early history of Earth, there must have been terrible hardships. Therefore there would have been great Artists." She appealed to the Warrior. "Elric, am I not right?"

He made no pretence that he had not heard the conversation.

"Hardship, my Lady," he said gravely, "leaves little time for the pursuit of art. The needs of survival are far too demanding."

"You speak from experience?"

"Unfortunately, I do. I have seen many worlds ravaged by war but on none of them have I seen an artistic upsurge. Death, my Lady, is far too real to permit of detached abstractions."



"Is that what you think of art?"

"Is it not true?"

"You are a materialist." There was contempt in her voice.

"Can't you accept the fact that there are appetites other than those of the flesh? To be stable we must have food for the mind as well as the body. The Artist has a very real place in our society."

"And the Warrior?"

"An Artist creates. A Warrior destroys."

"Growth and decay. Life and death. It is the way of life."

"Sophistry." She turned to Smith. "Do you agree?"

Smith made a small gesture with his hands, divorcing himself from the argument. Watching him Jak had the impression that he regarded the others as children unduly concerned with a trivial quarrel. Remembering their conversation Jak thought he knew why. To Smith there was no ground for argument. His Christianity, his Brotherhood of Man, whatever that was, had, for him, solved all such trivia.

Jak guessed that now he would begin to talk of his profession. He was not wrong. Evelyn was interested, Elric distantly polite and a little incredulous.

"Before the advent of space flight?"

"Before even the advent of atomic power, or any other form of mechanical power. Men depended on muscle in those days."

"You astound me!"

"Why so? Men have not always had machines to serve them."

"True, but . . ."

Jak closed his ears, legends did not interest him. He glanced at his watch and felt relief that the Period of Grace would soon be over.

Lelita struck a harsh note on her multichord and her sudden laughter was more musical than her playing.

"Enough! I cry finish!" She lifted her long, flame-tipped fingers and wriggled them before her face. "Would you have me wear them to the bone?"

"Space forbid!" Ric rose to his knees, his hands outstretched towards hers, his eyes glowing with admiration. "That such beauty should be marred!"

For a moment their fingers touched and between them flashed something warm and vital and as old as time. Then

the moment was over. Ric sat on his heels at his mother's side and Lelita, laughing as if at a joke, carelessly threw the multichord towards her Duenna.

If it was a demonstration it was a good one ; the Duenna was amazingly fast. Her hand, broad, splayed, thick with muscle, leapt out and caught the instrument as it fell towards the floor. Her harness creaked a little as she moved, the weapon belt empty now, the weapons locked beneath Captain's seal. But she had little need of them. She was an Amazon, big bodied, thick with muscle, the product of a high-G planet. She could smash in a man's chest with a blow, rip out his heart, kill in a hundred cunning ways.

She set the multichord carefully down on the floor and resumed her original position. Lelita laughed again, a girlish trill of pride.

"Isn't she clever ? Daddy bought her for me at an auction and gave her to me at my majority. She would die to protect me."

"She is not alone in that."

Jak glanced sharply at Ric. Space ! The boy was serious. This was no empty funning, undignified, perhaps, but basically harmless. This was disaster. No wonder Sar had looked so upset. How long had she known ?

Jak forced himself to control his instinctive anger, studying the problem with a calm detachment. So Ric had become attracted to the girl, fallen in love with her, perhaps, though Space knew why, someone as different from the Folk he couldn't imagine. He could exert Captain's Authority, of course, confine Ric until the voyage was over, but that was not the right way.

Force was never the right way.

He studied the girl. That business with the Duenna, had that been a warning ? And if so for whom ? Manager Longtheran was a possessive type, he would not take kindly to gossip about his wife. From the Folk she had nothing to fear, they would not be proud of one of their own falling in love with a girl of the People.

*The lounge flickered !*

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*The lounge flickered!*

"Jak!" Sar was on her feet her voice shrill with dread. Behind her, incredibly, another Sar sat on a chair her face expressionless as she listened to the music. Jak fought the confusion in his mind. He did not turn and look back. If he had done so he knew he would have seen himself.

"Sar!" He caught her hand, holding on to reality as the events of the past few minutes repeated themselves like a continuously playing film.

"Jak! What is it?"

She knew. They both knew. Even Ric, inexperienced as he was, he knew also. He rose to his feet, his eyes shocked while another Ric, composed and dreaming, remained on the floor.

"Captain!"

"Hold fast!" The warning was necessary. Reality and illusion—or was it illusion—merged and made nightmare. "Ric! Remain and seal the lounge. Sar! With me! Fast!"

Retaining hold of Sar's hand Jak lunged towards the door. The lounge flickered again and suddenly he was back beside his chair. He gritted his teeth, aimed at the door and ran. He made it into the corridor, nausea churning his stomach. He staggered down the passage towards the engine room, trying to ignore the flickerings which threw him back so that he seemed to be living a waking nightmare of running, running but never seeming to get anywhere.

"Jak!"

Sar was still with him. He stared down at her hand, it was white with pressure. He eased his grip a little.

"Keep moving!"

The ship was vibrating now, quivering like a taut harp string, flashing from the present back into the past and up to the present again. The flickers of the time-distortion effect blurred into an almost continuous succession of distortions. If anything it made their progress easier.

Then the flickering stopped, the time-distortion ended and they ran the last part of the way towards the engine room.

There was nothing they could do.

The ship had three Vortiski drive units, any two of which had power enough to send the ship and all it contained into No-Space. Had three units, Jak thought bitterly, now it had nothing but rubbish.

The drive units hadn't exploded, not in the sense of matter being thrust violently outwards from a centre. They hadn't imploded in the sense of matter being driven violently in on itself. The fields which they generated had vortexed so that every atom within the range of those fields had been spun with incredible force and suddenness.

"Lor and Con!" Sar fell silent, knowing what must have happened to them. They had been on engine room duty and within the range of the vortexing fields. Their bodies were now scattered thinly about the walls of the engine room. The drive units themselves, because of their construction, had not ruptured but rested, distorted and inert metal.

"Get Ric," ordered Jak. "Lock the People in the lounge. Find the rest of the Folk and bring them here."

He didn't have to repeat his orders. The Folk knew what to do in the case of an emergency even though they may never have met one in their entire lives. Sar ran to obey. Alone, Jak inspected the damage.

It wasn't bad, it was hopeless. There was no question of repair, only of replacement. But ships did not carry spare Vortiski drive units, not even the larger ships. A fifty per cent safety factor was all that normally was required.

Jak fetched a container, water, cleaner and waste. Grimly he began cleaning down the stippled walls. Sar joined him long before he had finished. Vin and Ric came with her.

"Lan?"

"Not to be found." Vin looked ill. "I was off-duty, asleep. Lan must have run to the engine room at the first signs of anything wrong. I suppose he must have thought that he could help throw out the drive before it was too



late." He looked at the walls. He didn't have to say what he was thinking.

"Check our position. Take Ric with you." Jak waited until they had gone. "Sar, you—"

"I will stay here." She fetched more cleaning materials. Silently she began to work. It could not, Jak knew, have been easy for her. Lor and Lan and Con and there had been the child . . .

He tried not to think of them as he wiped down the walls. It was a job, that was all, a routine Task of Cleansing, one which had to be done if the danger of infection was to be avoided. Even so his lips moved as he ejected the waste from the chute, silently repeating the Folk ritual for Folk dead. At least they had died and been buried in space as was their birthright.

He caught sight of Sar's expression as he turned from the chute.

"It was quick," he said. "They couldn't have felt a thing."

"Jak ! "

"Be calm." He held her close to him, feeling a wave of tenderness towards her he hadn't known for years. Not since her husband had died and he had come to fetch her and her young son. Fetching them both to the ship they had since then thought of as home.

"I'll be all right." She stepped back, smoothing her hair.

"Good. How are the People ?"

"Worried. Anxious. A little afraid."

"To be expected." He turned from her, his eyes staring at the drive units. The sight of them brought an actual, physical pain.

A rack of tools stood against the wall. He selected several, went to one of the units, fitted a tool and applied leverage. Sweat beaded his forehead. He changed tools and tried again, the veins in his throat standing clear against the skin with the fury of his effort. He was still straining when Ric came down with their position.

"About four parsecs from Zeta Ophinchus," he said dully.

"In normal space, of course. Vin is rechecking."

"I see."

Jak straightened and wiped his forehead. It could be, he knew, a death sentence. They were adrift in normal space

about fourteen light years from the nearest star, but it could have been ten times that for all the difference it made. Without engines they couldn't travel. Without Vortiski drive units they couldn't enter No-Space.

Sar noticed Ric's expression and forced herself to smile.

"Why so glum, Ric? We are still air-tight, have paragravity, have food and water. So what if the engines are dead, we can mend them, can't we?"

"Can we?"

"No." Jak replaced the tools back in their rack. "They are ruined, all of them."

"But—" Ric was young, he had yet to learn how to control fear. "But why?" He burst out. "They were working perfectly, I know they were. Why should they all go at once like that?"

"You know why." Jak controlled his impatience. Ric was his kin, he wanted to be proud of the boy. "Think. Remember the lounge, the time-distortion?"

"When everything seemed to be happening over and over?"

"Yes."

"Well?" Ric was blank. "What has that got to do with it?"

"You know your theory!" Jak's voice echoed his anger.

"You're Folk, not People, you know about these things. Think, boy! Think!"

## Chapter IV

What had happened was the one thing which could never have happened; the odds against it were astronomical. Two ships had met in No-Space. They had, for a fleeting instant of time, occupied a common area. In normal space that would have been impossible, they would have smashed to molten wreckage at the attempt. But No-Space was not normal space and the laws governing kinetic energy and mass did not apply.

Studying the drive units Jak could almost have wished they had. At least it would have been fast and clean and definite. A moment, perhaps, of realisation and then a merciful oblivion. There were worse ways to end.

Tiredly he straightened, working the kinks from his spine, blinking the smart from his eyes. Space but he was weary!



Not since he had been a raw youngster doing extra duty as punishment had he known such physical fatigue. And for such little reward !

"Is there hope ?" Ric, his young face pale in the glare of the overheads, was reluctant to accept reality.

"Hope of what ? Rescue ?" Jak was being sarcastic.

"You know what I mean."

"I hear what you say," corrected Jak. Irritation flamed within him. "And, just in case you have forgotten, I am Captain."

"Yes, Captain."

Sarcasm ? Jak doubted it. The youngster had had a shock, his safe, snug world had suddenly become terrifying, but that was no excuse for lax discipline. No excuse for the Captain, that was. Jak hardened his voice.

"Just because I am your uncle does not mean that you are permitted to take liberties. I promoted you on the grounds of merit. You can be demoted as easily."

Demotion meant automatic expulsion from the ship. Folk were not normally demoted and, if they were, they lived in the perpetual shadow of disgrace. The threat was not a light one.

"Yes, Captain." Ric swallowed and watching him, Jak wondered if he were swallowing his anger. He became more gentle.

"You know, Ric, in many ways you are fortunate. The possibility of collision between vessels is so remote that it has remained a theoretical probability rather than a demonstrated happening. You will have something to tell your children."

"Perhaps, Captain."

"You know what happened, of course ?"

"I heard Sar tell the People."

"She told them that there had been an accident. That is true enough. I did not mean that."

"No, Captain." Ric frowned. "When two ships meet in No-Space the Vortiski drives set up a resonance and cancel each other out. For a fraction of time the resonance can result in an actual distortion of time either positive or negative. Both drive units, both ships that is, are rendered powerless and flung into normal space." He recited it as though reading from a book.

"You knew that and yet you did not recognise the time-distortion when it came ?"

"No, Captain, I am sorry. I was unprepared, my attention was elsewhere, I was not ready . . ." He faltered into silence.

Jak restrained himself. Space! Who *could* be prepared for such a happening? It was only his affinity with the ship, the constant need for observance, the fine edge on which all Folk were expected to live which had enabled him to recognise the danger. Not that it had done any good, wryly he admitted that, but that wasn't the thing. The boy should have known.

The girl, of course. Lelita. She had claimed all Ric's attention. People!

Jak stooped and examined the casing of one of the units. The nuts were distorted, slightly oval, a thing impossible to see with the naked eye but plain enough when measured by instruments. No wonder he had been unable to loosen them with a wrench. The answer had been to burn them off with a torch but even that had not solved the problem. The casing had fitted with machined precision, the vortexion had probably welded it to a solid whole.

Tiredly he picked up the torch, dropped his goggles into place, triggered the flame. The heat of the portable atomic furnace made the engine room almost unbearable.

"May I be of help, Captain?"

"No." Jak didn't want Ric's inexperience spoiling things. And yet the boy had to be found something to do. Idleness was bad for morale. "Check the gardens. See that Vin lacks for nothing."

"Yes, Captain."

"Now that Lan is dead you may as well take over immediately."

"Communications, Captain?" Ric was surprised, he had a right to be.

"That among other duties." Jak turned his face from the torch, the metal was stubborn, it burned slowly. "Find Sar, she will tell you what to do."

"Yes, Captain. Captain?"

"What is it?"

"If the units are irreparable, what can we do?"

"Do?" Jak was surprised at the question. "There is only one thing we can do. Build another."

He didn't add, because it was unnecessary, that saying a thing wasn't the same as doing it. Theoretically it was



feasible to build a drive unit if the parts were available. But Lor had been the Engineer. And Lor was dead.

First Mate Sar filled the last container, loaded it on a tray and gestured for Vin to take the food to the lounge. Ric made an instinctive gesture, flushed as he felt the impact of his mother's eyes.

"Well?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me, Ric." There was sorrow, not anger in her voice. "You wanted to take in the tray, didn't you?"

"I thought that it was my place." Dispensing of food, while not a menial task for no task of the Folk could be menial, was one usually reserved for the more inexperienced members of the crew.

"Normally it would be your duty," agreed Sar. "But things are not normal." She stared hard at him. "I am not referring to the condition of the ship."

"No, mother." Ric was uneasy. Watching him Sar felt a great tenderness. He was so young! She bit her lip, forced herself to remember her position. She was not only Ric's mother. She was First Mate.

"That girl." She tried hard not to let acid into her voice. "The Aristo."

"Lelita?"

"That's the one. Are you in love with her?"

It was forthright, brutal in its abrupt directness. Ric was taken off-balance.

"I—"

"Are you in love with her?"

"I—I don't know." He was man enough to meet her stare. "She attracts me, I can't explain it. When we are apart I think of her all the time. When I am with her I feel only happiness and relaxation. I want to do things for her, protect her, hear her talk and watch her smile." He looked terribly young and helpless. "Is that love?"

"It could be. Have you touched her?"

"Her hands, no more."

"How did you feel?"

"As if I touched an electric wire. It was as if something ran through me at the contact. I felt as if I wanted to cry, I was so happy." He stared at his mother. "Is that love?"

"That is a part of love." Sar turned so that he should not see her eyes. "Your father and I, we felt things like that. But it was not only that, there were other things, so many other things. It was almost as if we were one person, so close did we grow. What you feel could be love or it could be desire. Do you want the girl? Physically, I mean?"

Ric did not pretend an ignorance he did not possess. He knew well enough what his mother meant. He nodded.

"Knowing what it means?"

"Yes."

"I see." Sar kept her face turned from him. Now that she had dragged it out into the open she felt better. Strangely enough she felt no disgrace. She had feared that she would but there was none of that. There was only sorrow and a great pity. He was, after all, her son.

"You know what this means," she said. "You are Folk, she is People."

"I know."

"Do you, Ric?" She turned and faced him, her eyes wet with tears. "Can you even begin to understand? Your life is ship life, not planet life. Even if she could be yours what have you in common? Once your desire has faded, what is there left?"

He remained silent.

"Not that she can ever be yours. She is to be married, you know that?"

"I know."

"She probably thinks it amusing to see the devotion in your eyes. People talk, Ric, especially female People. To them we are cold and aloof and remote, hardly human by their standards. Can't you understand that she only wants to test her attraction? It would be something for her to boast of in later years, this conquest of one of the Folk."

"Please!"

"You think I am wrong? You would think that. All right, assume that I am wrong and that she loves in return. What then? Are you going to kill the Duenna and steal the ship? Even if you could do that, what then? Turn Rogue? Rogue Folk are never happy, I know. They are trusted by none and despised by all. They operate the little ships for minor rulers and are the prey of terror and unease. Ric!" It was a mother's cry. "Don't break your heart!"



He looked at his hands then raised his eyes.

"I love her," he said simply. "I can't help that. As to the rest, what difference does it make? You talk of the future, what future? We are crippled, drifting in normal space and to us there is no future. If Lelita and I can be happy, even for a short while, would that be so wrong?"

"The ship will be repaired."

"I think not."

"You doubt the Captain?" Pride rang in her voice. "You don't know you uncle, Ric. He knows every atom of this vessel and he will never admit defeat. He will rebuild the drive unit and soon we shall all be safe." Her hand gripped his shoulder, her fingers causing him to wince. "Think of the future, son. Think of it."

"Yes, mother."

He looked like a small boy on the edge of tears.

Jak looked up as Sar entered the engine room. She carried a bowl of soup and stood, waiting for him to take it. When he did he set it down and returned immediately to his work.

"Jak."

"What is it?"

"Your soup. Eat it before it gets cold."

He grunted, looked as if he would refuse then shrugged and gulped down the steaming liquid. Sar took the empty bowl.

"Progress?"

"Small." He glowered at the mass of copper on which he worked. He had stripped off his uniform tunic and the overheads reflected from his pale skin. Delicate instruments lay scattered on the bench together with coarser tools for the actual working of the metal. Sar glanced at the copper mass. She knew what it was.

"The heart of a Vortiski unit." Jak spoke her thoughts. "Or rather the melted down and refashioned remains of what used to be the heart of three units." He rasped his hand across his unshaven chin. "I hope to Space that the radioactive alloy balance hasn't been thrown too far out by the reworking."

"Or the vortexion fields."

"Or that," he agreed. His hand made a rasping noise again. His stubble irritated him. "Too many variables. I

wish that Lor had survived, he would have had this finished by now."

"You don't need Lor." Sar was confident.

"No?" Jak was annoyed. "Oh, I know the theory, because I am Captain I am supposed to know whatever everyone else knows." He gave a brittle laugh. "Take that to its logical extreme and there would be no need for a crew at all, only a Captain."

"But you do know."

"I *knew*." He emphasised the word. "I learned it all once, no doubt of that, but damn it, Sar, that was years ago, a man forgets."

"I don't understand." She did understand, she didn't want to recognise what he was saying.

"I'm telling you that I've forgotten the finer details." Jak gestured towards the mass of copper on the bench. "Look at that thing. It has to be machined just so. Not nearly so, or almost so, but exactly so. It has to be shaped in a certain way so that each part has a special relationship to each other part."

"So?"

"So I'm trying to remember just what size each part must have. No tolerances, don't forget, the exact size."

"You know that." She was confident. "You know it as well as I know basic navigation, obstetrics, the tending of the algae vats. You know it as well as you know your own control room, the contours of your face."

"Do I?" He was ironic.

"Yes." She rested her hand on his shoulder. "You are tired and a tired mind plays tricks. You haven't been eating and an empty stomach makes for depression. Sit down and rest while I get you more soup."

"No thank you."

"You prefer something else?"

"I prefer this damn thing to be finished so we can be on our way." He caught her hand and smiled up at her. "Sorry, Sar. If I snapped, that is. It's just that I'm worried."

"About the drive unit?"

"No, not exactly. I know what to do, I suppose, you were right there. I can even manage the machining but it won't be easy and it will take me about five times longer than it would Lor. No, Sar, it's something else."



She knew what it was. She was Folk.

"One unit," he said. "To move our mass we need at least two."

"Fifty per cent reduction."

"At least." He leaned back, closing his eyes against the glare of the overheads. "It isn't going to be easy, Sar."

Folk were not given to overstatement. To cut the mass of the ship and contents by a half would not be easy. Some things could not be touched. The drive unit for one and it would be a massive thing. The atomic power supply, the external venturis for planetary landing, the heart and guts of the ship.

And, aside from that, there was little that was dispensable. The cargo, of course, they could save on that. But the ship was a small one, designed more for passengers than freight. They would make do, of course, they would have to make do. But it wouldn't be easy.

"I'll attend to it." Sar picked up the bowl, unconsciously weighing it in her hand.

"Get Ric and Vin to commence the clearance." Jak didn't open his eyes. "Have them cut away all excess metal from the indispensable quarters, you know what has to be done."

"Yes, Jak."

"It means gutting the ship."

"I know." She could sympathise with him. No Captain liked to see his command reduced to near-wreckage. "Shall I tell the People?"

"Why not?" He was on his feet again, frowning at the metal on the bench. "But don't alarm them, Sar. Anything but that."

## Chapter V

Elric studied the board for a long moment and then carefully moved a piece.

"Check!"

Smith, his eyes wide against the pallor of his face, glanced down, moved, leaned back in his chair.

"Checkmate!"

Elric gave the board a startled glance then admitted defeat.

"For a man of peace, Cleric, you play the war-game well. Another?"

"If you wish. It will help pass the time."

That, Elric admitted, was as good a reason as any other. They sat in the lounge, huddled into one corner as if to escape from the bleakness of the stripped metal surrounding them. Their cabins had long since been gutted, even the partitions burned away, the men sharing one communal room for sleeping, the women another. Waking hours were spent in the lounge, each amusing himself as best he might. Food, hastily prepared, was served by one or another member of the crew.

"A long journey," said Elric. "Longer than I expected." His eyes watched Smith.

The Cleric nodded, his thoughts apparently far away. On Earth, perhaps? Elric didn't know. During their association he had come to have a great respect for the little man, a respect which had something to do with his profession. Smith had a belief in something bigger even than the universe and a code of ethics which, Elric admitted, would have ended his profession if followed. Warriors and Christianity had little in common.

He reset the board, hesitated a moment then, as Smith nodded, moved a pawn.

"A long journey," he repeated. "Longer, perhaps, than any of us expected to make."

"All of us expect to make a long journey." Smith did not look at the Warrior.

"Death?" Elric shrugged. "Does the concept bring fear?"

"No." Smith's eyes were luminous. "Regret, perhaps, but never fear." He looked at Elric. "Why have you mentioned death?"

"I spoke only of a long journey."

"I know of what you spoke." Smith glanced around the lounge. "You are a man who has travelled much. You have seen many worlds and known many things. It comes to me that you perhaps know more than I, more than any of us in this room."

"I know that we are in trouble." Elric studied the board, this time he was determined to win. "They are cutting away parts of the ship, dumping our luggage, reducing mass as much as they can."

"But they have rebuilt the drive."

"They have rebuilt a single unit of the drive." Elric moved another piece. Smith followed. Elric moved again. "A single unit."

Smith didn't understand.

"I was employed by the Carl of Delgan once," said Elric. "We had some Rogue Folk and a handful of others to transport our troops. In space we were attacked, the game of war can be played by both sides. The ship I was in was hit and damaged. We drifted for weeks. We had little food, little air, little water. The journey, you understand, was a short one and every man possible had been crammed into the hull."

Carefully he moved a piece.

Smith replied to the move.

"Rescue was inevitable—if we could hold out." Elric shrugged. "We held out. Fifty out of five hundred."

"The rest?"

"They died so that we could live."

Smith remained silent.

"One drive unit," mused Elric. "A desperate reduction of mass." He glanced at the board. "It is your move."

"The others, do they know?"

"Know what?" Elric shrugged. "I am only making an assumption, I could be wrong."

"A long journey." Smith nodded, his eyes regretful.

"I could be wrong."

"Please God that you are."

"God?" Elric brought his castle into play.

"God." Smith moved his bishop. "Check!"

Elric blocked the threat. Smith moved another piece.

"Check!"

Elric took the bishop. Smith took a pawn.

"Check!"

Elric moved his queen. His breath rasped in his throat. Smith moved a knight.

"Checkmate!"

He leaned back, not thinking of his victory, taking no pride at having beaten the other man.

Morrow wiped his face and glowered at the dice.

"Bunco!"



"Covered !" Percheon threw wadded notes onto a heap between them. His eyes rolled as he watched the throw of the polyhedrons. Morrow swore.

"Call it luck ! Did you ever see such luck ?"

"Too bad." Percheon had no time for a bad loser. "You want to try again ?"

"What's the use ?" Morrow dabbed at his face again. "It's this damn ship, that's what's the trouble. It's got a jinx on it, I felt it from the beginning."

"Oh, I don't know." Percheon didn't feel the same way. Morrow scowled.

"What else can you call it ? Look at the way we broke down, does that normally happen ? And what of the way they are stripping the vessel ? Damn Folk ! They even threw out my luggage."

Percheon smiled.

"You can grin. They threw out your precious serum too."

"What !" Percheon leapt to his feet, his face distorted.

"No. They wouldn't do that."

"Ask if you don't believe me." Morrow winked. "I know, I've got information from the source."

"They wouldn't." Percheon was horror stricken. "They just wouldn't do a thing like that !"

Morrow shrugged. He grinned as the Courier ran from the lounge.

"He'll find out," he said to Evelyn.

"Is it true ?"

"True enough. The boy, Ric, he told Lelita what was happening. She wanted to save her music box, that thing she plays, but he said that it had to go. Damn near crying about it, he was." He looked at the Artist. "Your stuff's gone too."

"I know."

"Don't you care ? Doesn't it worry you ? Make you mad ?"

"No, why should it ?"

Evelyn looked distastefully at Morrow. The man was so gross, so materialistic. How could he ever hope to understand the sensitivities of an Artist ? Material possessions were nothing ; the creative spirit everything.

She stared with unfocussed eyes, glad of the discomfort and the disturbance of routine the breakdown had caused. She

was even glad of the primitive sleeping arrangements, the snatch-meals, the glimpses she received of the real persons behind their civilised veneer. So must the primitives have lived, the great Artists before the Age of Expansion when life was a continual struggle and hurt and heartbreak were a part of the normal scheme of living.

Life must have been wonderful then. An Artist must have been able to create great works laden as they were with raw emotion. She would create such a work. After the Captain had fixed the vessel and they landed she would go out into the night and stare at the stars and feel the naked emotion rise within her so that she would be able to summon the creative urge.

She focussed her eyes as Lelita entered the lounge, her Duenna at her heels. The girl was annoyed, furious at the delay and ready to vent her rage.

"The Manager shall hear of this," she stormed. "I was assured that we would reach Thurgan's World in ample time for the ceremony. I'll see to it that this ship is barred from the planet."

"This ship is getting pretty well wrecked," said Morrow slyly. "Don't you mean the Captain?"

"The Captain then, you know what I mean." Lelita slumped fuming into a chair. "You know what that man did? He threw out all my trousseau. All my gowns and cosmetics, all the things I was taking to my new home. He threw them out, dumped them." She was almost crying with temper.

"Did you protest?"

"Of course I did." Lelita stared at Morrow as if he were insane. "I told him that I would make him suffer for it but he just ignored me. He treated me as if I wasn't even there."

"That's Folk." Morrow pursed his lips. "Too damn high and mighty for the rest of us. They'll be tossing us out next, you see."

Elric dropped a pawn.

Sar weighed the mass of metal, made a notation on her pad and then nodded to Vin. He lifted the metal and headed for the air-lock. The hum of the cycling echoed faintly through the bowels of the ship.

"How much?" Jak stared around the gutted vessel, trying not to feel the pain in his heart. The ship was more

than just his command. It was his home, his environment, his reason for living. Killing it was like committing suicide.

"Not enough." Sar studied her pad. The ship had a hundred units of mass and could increase that a permissible fifty by cargo and crew. No matter what they did they had to reduce the actual bulk of the vessel itself by a quarter before the jury-rigged Vortiski drive unit could thrust them into No-Space.

Jak took the pad from her hand, his eyes calculating the neat column of figures. A quarter of the actual mass of the ship was a sizable amount. Most of the mass was concentrated in the drive assembly, both Vortiski and reaction, and these could not be touched. True, he had thrown out the useless remains of the drive units but that had not helped much. The bulkheads had gone, the cargo, the passenger luggage, the stores of food and much water.

"Not enough," repeated Sar. She was watching his face.

"I know." He handed back the pad. "Get rid of every scrap of furniture, all unessential tools, the algae vats."

"The vats?" Vin hesitated.

"You heard! Obey!" Tension sharpened Sar's voice. She watched him collect Ric and go about their task. "Is that wise, Jak?"

"Necessary. We can breathe stored air during the journey and can starve if we have to."

"Agreed. Providing that we can enter No-Space and run into no more trouble."

"Unless we enter No-Space further trouble is academic." He was sharp, he forced himself to be gentle. He could understand her reluctance to destroy their air and basic food supply. "Will it be enough?"

"No." She didn't even look at her pad. "We still need more."

He didn't question her abilities. She knew the weight and mass of every portion of the ship and what it contained. If she said that it was not enough then that was definite.

"We can't cut away the hull." The Vortiski drive depended on field relationships set up in the conduits within the hull itself. "We need the instruments. What else can we dump?"

Sar remained silent.

"External working suits. Floor plates. Overhead lights and the cables to same. Reactor shielding?" For a moment he was foolishly tempted then regained better sense. The



shielding was massive but weakening it would be criminal stupidity. Radiation death would be certain. He noticed Sar's expression. "Not enough?"

"No."

He wasn't surprised, she would have accounted for the obvious.

"How close are we?"

"Close." She ran the tip of her tongue over her lower lip. "Jak."

"Yes?"

"What chance have we?"

"A good one." He smiled as he met her eyes. "Sar, stop worrying! I've rebuilt the unit and it will work. Our only problem now is to reduce our mass. Now, what else can we dispense with?"

"The Log?" She hesitated, conscious of what she was asking.

"Count it in. If necessary it will have to go." His face was hard.

It grew harder as she slaughtered his ship.

## Chapter VI

Smith woke with the sense of something wrong. He rose, his eyes wide in the dimness. The compartment in which the men slept was vast and filled with shadows. He thought that he heard the soft noise as of a door being closed.

His foot touched something soft. Immediately it became alive and hard, twisting and rising all in the one smooth motion. Elric stared at Smith in the dimness.

"You startled me." His hands fell from the killing position they had automatically taken. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know." Smith searched the compartment with his eyes, recognising each thing he saw. One of the shapeless bundles which were men asleep looked, somehow different. Morrow? Percheon? It had to be one or the other, the Folk did not sleep with People.

Elric saw the direction of his stare and stooped over the bundle. He rose, his face impassive.

"Percheon?"

"Yes." Smith knew what was coming even before the Warrior spoke. "We'd better call the Captain. He's dead."

Percheon had not died a natural death. Jak examined the body, noting the ugly marks around the throat, the bulging eyes and gaping mouth. He looked at Smith.

"You heard something?"

"I did. I woke, why I do not know, and heard the sound of a closing door." He reflected a moment. "It sounded like a closing door."

"And then you woke Elric?"

"I trod on him. He woke immediately."

"I see." Jak fell silent, his eyes brooding. Morrow cleared his throat with a harsh, rasping sound.

"Someone murdered him, Captain. That's it, isn't it?" Jak did not answer.

"Someone sneaked in here and did for him." Morrow's eyes shone as if they were wet. "Or maybe they didn't. Seems funny to me that Elric should wake so suddenly. Smith too for that matter."

"I trod on Elric," said Smith evenly.

"So you tell us. But we've only your word for it that you woke to the sound of a door. Maybe you were awake a long time before that. Maybe if you hadn't trod on Elric, if you did tread on him, he would have been the next. Or me." He stared at Jak. "Captain. I refuse to sleep with these people again."

"Why?"

"One of them is a murderer."

"You have no proof of that," said Jak quietly. "Any more than they have proof that it was not you who killed the Courier." . . .

"I didn't kill him." Morrow dabbed at his glistening face. The ship was not too warm but he was sweating. "I had no reason to kill him. I liked the guy." He stared from one to the other. "I tell you that I didn't kill him. Damn it, what reason would I have had?"

Jak knew the answer to that. Did Morrow? Did the others? He watched them and knew that they all shared the secret.

"I will remove the body." He stooped and picked it up in his arms. The Courier had been a big man but Jak held him easily. "Return to your rest now. There is nothing more you can do."

They would not sleep, he knew that, but what they did couldn't affect him. He strode from the sleeping compartment towards the air-lock. Sar joined him as he put down the body.

"Eviction?"

"What else?" He operated the controls, the inner door swung open. He lifted the Courier into the chamber, sealed it and spun the valves. There was a hissing, a silence, a signal light flashed and, despite himself, Jak's lips moved in the Folk ritual for the dead. He looked at Sar.

"Who told them?"

"Need anyone?" She knew what he meant. "The People are not Folk but they are not unintelligent. They know that we are reducing mass. Perhaps they decided to reduce it still more."

"By murdering their own." Jak nodded, his face grim. "That I can understand—if they knew how close we were. But they could not know, not unless someone told them."

Sar didn't speak, she was almost afraid of her own thoughts. She busied herself with details, making an entry in her book, lowering a certain figure, cancelling out the mass of the Courier.

Jak watched her, feeling no pleasure, thinking only of the added weight of his responsibilities.

Jak hated the inquiry. He sat in the control room Sar at his side, Ric and Vin by the door. Evelyn sat before him, the Artist was strangely composed.

"So that is all I can tell you," she said. "I was asleep and heard nothing until wakened."

"You sleep with Lelita and the Duenna?"

"Of course."

"Are you friendly with them?" A useless question but one which had to be asked.

"No. We avoid each other as much as possible."

"This murder, has it horrified you?"

"No." She made a gesture with her hands. "Oh, I did not dislike the man, but I had no great feeling for him either. He was just a person. Should I feel upset because a minute percentage of the human race has died?"

"No." Jak leaned forward. "Show me your hands."

She extended them, slender hands on slender wrists her fingers almost as long as Lelita's. The nails were unbroken, the wrists unmarked.



"Thank you." Jak leaned back. "Now tell me, have you noticed at any time one of the Folk, a member of the crew, in deep converse with anyone you know?" His eyes were intent. "Answer please!"

"No." Her hesitation was obvious. "No, I can't say that I have."

"Thank you."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Please send in the Warrior."

Elric sat easily in the chair. His face was impassive, his hands rested lightly on his knees, his eyes held interest. He answered the ritual questions calmly enough.

"I was asleep. Something touched me, a foot I now know it to be, and I awoke and rose instantly. The man who had touched me was Smith."

"Then you noticed him staring about the compartment?"

"I did. There were only two others. I went to the one at which he stared. It was Percheon. He was dead."

"You are a Warrior. Did the manner of his death signify anything to you?"

"No."

"I see." The man was lying, even Jak, inexperienced as he was, had gained some information. He repeated his question as to familiarity with a member of the crew.

"I have noticed nothing you are not familiar with," Elric said evenly. "Lelita is, of course, an attractive woman and it is to be expected that men should pay her attention. They are foolish if they read more into her words than she intends. She is an animal who thrives on conquests, an expert player at the game of love."

Jak glanced at Sar then followed her gaze to where Ric and Vin stood by the door. The Warrior was saying something to someone. To Sar?

"She must not be blamed for what she is," continued Elric. "She will take what she can get but she has no morals, no honesty, no ethics. She is as beautiful as an atomic furnace and as deadly."

"Thank you." Jak sat for a moment deep in thought. "The murder, did it surprise you?"

"No."

"You expected it?"

"I expected something like it." Elric met Jak's eyes, his

expression bland. "The survival instinct is very strong, Captain. Percheon was a big man."

"You know?"

"I can assume." Elric smiled, his hands spread before him. A heavy ring on one finger glowed in the light of the overheads. "It is not something of which I have talked."

Jak felt Sar's eyes upon him and remembered her words. The People were not unintelligent, Elric in particular. But Evelyn had not known, of that he would swear.

"It may be necessary for me to ask for People's Choice." Jak stared at the Warrior. "I think you know what that means."

"In order to safeguard some, others must volunteer to die." Elric's eyes shadowed as if at a memory. "Yes, I think I know what it means."

"If it comes to that, what reasons have you for demanding that you should be chosen?"

"None."

"None?"

"I used all my reasons a long time ago. No, Captain, life does not mean so much to me now that I would bother to plead for it. I did that once, fought like a dog for it, intrigued and killed and watched better men die. I lived in order to kill other men with the exercise of my profession. That was many years ago and I was young then. Now I am not young and see life as it really is. I shall not bother to demand that I be spared."

"Thank you."

"You are gracious, Captain." Elric hesitated by his chair. "Will it come to that?"

"That will be all."

"If it should," said Elric. "Spare the man Smith."

"What is he to you?"

"He is a Cleric."

He sounded as if that should be reason enough for Jak and the worlds of the universe.

Lelita entered with her Duenna at her heels. She sat, the Duenna stood. The girl answered for the both of them.

"I slept and woke and saw nothing. Why, Captain, surely you couldn't possibly imagine that I had anything to do with something so horrible!"

"Your Duenna?"

"She was with me every moment of the time."

"How do you know that? You have said that you were asleep."

"I slept with my head on her lap. Poor thing, surely you aren't going to doubt my word?" She lowered her voice. "If you ask me it was that man Elric. He is a warrior, he would know how to kill people in their sleep."

"Why should he want to kill the Courier?"

"Can't you guess?" She leaned forward, proud and confident of her youth and beauty. "Why, even I know that you are having trouble reducing mass. The drive won't work unless we reduce it, will it? I mean, throwing out the furniture and luggage and cutting away the bulkheads wasn't enough, you still have to find more."

"Who told you this?"

"Why, no one, no one at all." Her denial was firm but her eyes flickered. Jak felt a coldness grip his heart. Poor Sar!

"So you think that Percheon was killed in order to reduce our mass?"

"Well, he could have been, couldn't he?"

"Doesn't the concept of a man being killed horrify you?"

"Of course, but then he wasn't really anything special, was he? I mean, he wasn't like you, he wasn't needed to operate the ship. He didn't have anything and I don't suppose that anyone will miss him now that he's lost his serum. In fact I wouldn't be surprised to find that it was the best thing which could have happened to him. I mean, a Courier who loses his charge suffers for it, doesn't he?"

"Not to the extent of losing his life."

"Well, maybe he thought differently about it." Her eyes shone with a sudden idea. "Could he have killed himself?"

"Suicide?"

"Yes. He was worried about losing his serum. Maybe he felt that he had nothing to live for. Does that make sense?"

"It might." Jak stared at her for a long moment, then looked at the Duenna. She stood, as solid as the hull, expressionless, an extension of the person whose property she was.

"Thank you." Jak signalled dismissal. "Send in Smith."

Smith sat and answered in his soft, gentle voice. He had wakened, he did not know just why. He had heard a sound. He had touched Elric and then he had noticed something odd about the way Percheon was lying.



"Odd?"

"Yes. His position was wrong. I thought it odd."

"How odd? The man could have moved in his sleep."

"Perhaps. I did not think of that. His position was different to what I remembered."

"You have a good memory?"

"I have a perfect memory." It was a simple statement of fact. Jak glanced at Sar and repeated his question about intimacy with the crew. Smith merely shook his head.

"I cannot speak of that."

Kindness? Sympathy? A genuine desire not to cause trouble? It could have been for any reason, not all of them good. But he hadn't lied even though he had evaded telling the truth.

"Your profession, does it forbid the taking of life?"

"It does."

"Does this murder horrify you?"

"Yes." Smith bowed his head.

Jak waited, then told him of People's Choice. He had to repeat it before Smith fully understood.

"Does that horrify you?"

"Self-sacrifice is the highest emotion. No, that some should die in order that others may live would not horrify me."

"And you?"

Smith hesitated.

"Thank you." Jak nodded towards the door. "That will be all. Send in Morrow."

Morrow blustered, swore that he knew nothing, made several wild accusations and gave a lecherous grin when asked about mingling of Folk and People. Jak cut him short.

"Thank you. You know that we have to reduce mass?"

"I'd be a fool not to know it."

"You're a heavy man, Morrow."

"So what?" Alarm dawned in his eyes. "No! You can't do that!"

"Do what?"

"Dump me out into space. I know all about you Folk, with you the ship comes first, but you aren't going to kill me like Percheon was killed."

"You think we killed Percheon?"

"Someone did." His eyes flickered towards the door.

"And with a damn good reason too."

There was more. He put up a good case for not being

chosen for People's Choice and made several remarks, all violently abusive about the crew. Jak dismissed him, sent Ric and Vin about their duties and sat, his eyes brooding, his face a mask.

"Jak." Sar touched his arm.

"Yes?"

"You know who did it?"

"I know."

"Are you going to do anything about it?" This time she wasn't talking about the murder.

"Not yet."

He reached for her pad and engrossed himself with calculations.

## Chapter VII

It was the last Walk of Inspection. Jak strode around the gutted vessel and tried not to remember how things used to be. It seemed a dead ship with the algae tanks ripped out, the bulkheads mostly cut away, the shining overheads torn from their mountings, even their feed wires drawn from the conduits.

So much damage, he thought, and for so little saving in mass. Internal structures were mostly of lightweight alloys and plastics, it was a hard thing to reduce total mass a whole quarter by tearing them out. More than a quarter, he reminded himself, the crew and People had to be compensated for.

Sar walked at his side, sharing his grief and nursing grief of her own. They passed through a doorless opening and Jak frowned at the sight of Smith. The Cleric was sitting on a naked floor stanchion, he seemed to be talking to himself.

"Leave him." Sar touched Jak's arm.

"Is he ill?"

"No." She waited until they had passed the man. "I've seen him do it before. He told me that he was praying."

"Praying?"

"Talking to his God."

"I see." Jak saw but he didn't understand. How could a man talk to something bigger than infinity?

Smith, from his position, watched them pass. He was glad that they had not spoken to him. He would have like to explain many things to the Captain but, between them gaped the Folk-People gulf.

He sighed, remembering the interview and what the Captain must have made of his hesitation when asked if he would volunteer his life. How to explain? How to say that his life was not wholly his to give away?

He sighed again, remembering all the people in the Hive on Earth who had contributed their little so that one of them, at least, could have the opportunity to travel among the stars. He was unworthy of their trust, God knew, but he had something they did not have. He had a perfect memory, an eidetic memory and could remember in fine detail and true colour everything he had seen and heard since leaving Earth.

When he returned he would tell them of what he had seen, talk of worlds beyond their imagination, relate conversations for them to discuss. They were poor on Earth, even the tapes were expensive commercialised trash. They had chosen him to be their eyes and ears and he could not fail them.

And, if he could convert one single individual to the Glory of God, then he would die content.

He knelt and tried again to pray but for some reason prayers would not come. Instead he caught himself thinking of something, a sound, the sound, apparently, of a closing door. What had made him think of that? The time of the murder, yes, but why had he thought the sound was that of a closing door?

He frowned, concentrating on the period, his unusual memory throwing every second into fine detail. He had awakened and then heard the sound. Had it woken him or had something else? He had stepped forward and Elric had risen at his feet. He had looked towards Percheon, no, towards a bundle, he had not known at the time who it was, and the Warrior had gone directly towards it.

And the body had been warm. Percheon newly slain.

Who was the murderer?

He rose, his face even paler than normal. He knew. And yet, knowing, what could he do? What had been done was for the best, so those remaining could live—so went the justification. And yet there was another more potent command.

*Thou shalt not kill!*

And he was a Christian.

Ric was shame-faced. He could hardly meet Jak's eyes and yet, despite his shame, he did not attempt to lie.

"Yes, Captain, I feel towards the girl."



"You have been talking with her, seeing her?"

"Yes, Captain."

"He loved her." Sar's voice was near breaking. "Jak ! He is young !"

"He is Folk."

"He is human."

Jak turned so that they could not see his face. Did they think him a monster ? He was human too but did that plea excuse what had been done ? He composed himself.

"Ric, when you spoke with the girl, did you tell her of People's Choice ?"

"No, Captain."

"Did she ask you ? Tell the truth now, boy. Did she ?"

"No, Captain." Ric hesitated. "We spoke of many things, silly things. She talked of the ship, would we be able to effect repairs, things like that. I told her yes. I told her that there was no danger. I did not alarm her in any way."

"And yet she knew that we had to reduce mass."

"Yes. Someone told her. I think it was Morrow. She came to me and asked me what would happen if we couldn't reduce it enough."

"And ?"

"I told her not to worry. I said that, no matter what happened, she would be safe. I swore it."

He meant it too, Jak could see that. He did not like to think of the lengths to which the boy would have gone to keep his promise.

He nodded dismissal.

"Return to your duties. When you have finally evicted the last scrap of expendable material report to me. Bring Vin with you."

"Yes, Captain."

The boy turned, walked away, his back straight, his head high. Sar gripped Jak's arm.

"Jak !"

He did not look at her.

"My son, Jak ! Your nephew ! You can't do it !"

"They are Folk. They will understand."

"Not Ric ! Jak, not Ric !" The emotion in her voice hurt his heart. "Take me, but leave the boy. Jak ! I demand my right for Folk Choice !"

"You are not acceptable."

He turned and looked at her, his eyes meeting her own. She should know this already. She should know that when the decision had to be made then Folk made it on the basis of expendability. He was Captain, he was essential. She was First Mate, she could not go. Ric and Vin were not necessary to the functioning of the ship. If Folk had to be evicted in order to reduce mass then they were the ones to go.

Sar opened her mouth but before she could say anything sound rolled around them. Screams, a peculiar thrumming which must have been caused by pounding feet. The lack of internal furnishings distorted the noises, intensified them, sent weird echoes singing from the metal. Jak glanced at Sar and then hurried towards the People's quarters. Evelyn ran towards them. The Artist had lost her composure, her hair was wild and her eyes wilder. She had, Jak guessed, been screaming though she made no sound now.

She caught his arm, her chest heaving with the effort of breathing.

"Morrow!" She gulped and gestured behind her.

"Well?" He gripped her arms and shook her.

"He's dead!" Horror came into her eyes. "I was walking alone, thinking, and went into a shadowed place. I touched something. It was big and soft and cold. I looked and saw what it was." She began to tremble. "It was Morrow! Dead!"

"Calm yourself!"

"I'm calm." She fought for control. "I screamed and the others came." She started as Ric and Vin ran towards them. "They're there now."

"We'll join them." Jak met Sar's stare. "All of us."

Still holding the Artist he led the way towards the others.

It was a frozen tableau with Morrow the grinning spectator. He had been killed as Percheon had been killed, his body thrust against the inner hull, supported by a stanchion. Shadows filled the corner where he was.

Jak examined him then turned and faced the People. They met his eyes, each in their different way. Lelita was nervous, her Duenna calm and as solid as ever. Elric nonchalant. Evelyn near-hysterical. Smith—Smith was worried.

"It was the Duenna!" Evelyn was accusing. "She's the only one who could have killed like that. Lelita told her to do it."

Jak remained silent. He was watching Smith.

"It was Elric!" Lelita's voice was shrill. "He knows how to kill!"

Elric shrugged, not bothering to answer the accusation.

"It was the Duenna!" Evelyn was positive. "Look at her! Look at the size of those hands!" She trembled with anger. "And you, you cheap little bitch, you made her do it!"

"You lie!" Lelita was also losing her temper. "And you should know better. We were all together in the sleeping quarters. How could she have left me without you knowing?"

"Silence!" Jak waited until the noise had died. He looked at Smith. "Well?"

"I have nothing to say."

"No?" Jak glanced at the others. "Well, I have."

"You know who the killer is?" Sar touched his arm. She had spoken in Talk, he answered her the same.

"Yes. Now be silent." He changed to Interspatial. "You will remember that, after Percheon was found dead, I held an inquiry. During that inquiry I spoke with you all separately. It was during this inquiry that I discovered who had killed Percheon."

"You mean you knew who the killer was and said nothing?" Lelita's voice rose to a scream. "Did you want us all to be killed?"

"Not all, only two of you." Jak paused. "It was essential that two, at least, should die."

He looked at their faces, knowing that they could not understand.

"We have to reduce mass," he explained tiredly. "Even with stripping the furnishings we still had to reduce mass. Even with evicting those of the Folk who could be spared, still we had too great a mass." He felt Ric and Vin stare at him. Well, no matter, they had to learn the truth sooner or later. They were Folk. They knew what had to be done.

"Horrible!" Evelyn hid her face in her hands. She had completely lost her poise. "To deliberately wait until the killer had struck again so that—"

"So that those who are left may live." Jak could not understand her horror. "I could have given you People's Choice but to what end? You would each have pleaded to be allowed to survive and, in any case, that would have taken too much time. We have thrown out all we can spare and have very few supplies left. This way was both quick and definite."



"But the killer, what of him?" Lelita wanted to know the answer. "Shouldn't he die too?"

"Why? To what purpose?"

"He has killed," said Smith suddenly. "It was not for him to determine who should die. Thou shalt not kill!"

"Is that a law?" Jak turned the words over in his mind. They made sense, Folk were not permitted to kill Folk, not unless it was done with Captain's Authority.

"You know the killer?" Smith's eyes blazed.

"I know. You know also."

Smith remained silent. Jak looked at the other.

"It is a simple matter of logic. No emotion was present, it was a survival technique, only that. I eliminated the Artist because, of all of you, she knew nothing of our problem. Smith is a Cleric and it seems to be a part of his profession that he must not take life. Morrow, of course, is now eliminated both as a person and as a suspect."

"The Duenna did it." Evelyn was spiteful. "She was made to do it."

"Why? Of you all Lelita was the one with the most assurance that, no matter what happened, she, personally, would be safe." He glanced at Ric. "She had good authority for that."

"Elric then?" Lelita echoed her surprise. "He?"

"Who else?" Jak stared at the Cleric. "You heard the sound of metal knocking, you thought that it was a closing door. But there were no doors, we had stripped them all. What you heard was the sound of his ring rapping against the floorplates. And, as you said, he woke fast when you touched him."

"So would you wake fast had you slept in the places I have known, Captain."

"You deny it?"

"No." Elric lifted his hand and stared at the ring on his finger. "No need to deny the obvious. Yes, I killed Percheon and Morrow, I reduced our mass. Now I will reduce it still more."

Jak snatched at his arm but was a fraction too late. Something spat from the ring on his finger, missing the Duenna but striking Lelita instead. On the pale skin of her throat a vibrating metal insect buzzed, taking her life with its super-sonic vibration.

The Duenna made a sound deep in her throat and lunged forward. The ring spat again but the Amazon ignored the death biting her shoulder. Her hands reached for the Warrior. They died together.

Jak sighed. It was enough. He looked at Ric and Vin saved by Elric's hand from having to evict themselves into space. He felt Sar's eyes upon him and managed to smile.

It was bad, but it could have been worse. Elric had died as he had lived, adhering to his own code of honour, and, if at the last his aim had been bad, who was to blame for that.

Ric would forget, Hypmed treatment would see to that. The ship could be refashioned and normal life resumed again. The smooth flow of Walks of Inspection, Tasks of Cleansing, Completion of Log, Periods of Grace, all would embrace them with their busy demands.

As to the People? Jak could not feel for them. Perhaps they too would forget. Perhaps, even, they would one day appreciate what the Warrior had done for them. But he doubted it. People were weak.

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He was glad that he was Folk.

—E. C. Tubb

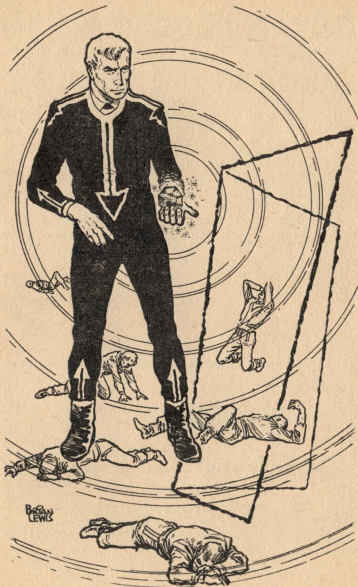
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*Ever since Calvin Knox's "Chalice of Death" trilogy which were published in Nos. 1, 3 and 5, we have had requests for further stories by this versatile American and here at last is the story we promised you many months ago. Totally different of course, from his previous series, but just as enjoyable.*

# THE SILENT INVADERS

by **CALVIN M. KNOX**

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*Illustrated by LEWIS*

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## Chapter I

The Starship *Lucky Lady* thundered out of overdrive half a million miles from Earth, and began the long steady ion-drive glide at Earth norm grav toward the orbiting depot. In his second-class cabin aboard the starship, the man whose papers said he was Major Abner Harris of the Interstellar Development Corps stared at his face in the mirror. He wanted to make sure for the hundredth time that there was no sign of where his tendrils once had been.

He smiled ; and the even-featured, undistinguished face they had put on him drew back, lips rising in the corners, cheeks tightening, neat white teeth momentarily on display. Major Harris scowled, and the face darkened.

It behaved well. The synthetic white skin acted as if it were his own. The surgeons back on Darruu had done a superb job on him.

They had removed the fleshy four-inch-long tendrils that sprouted at a Darruui's temples ; they had covered his deep golden skin with an overlay of convincingly Terran white, and grafted it so skilfully that by now it had become his real skin. Contact lenses turned his eyes from red to blue-grey. Hormone treatments had caused hair to sprout on head and body, where none had been before. They had not meddled with his internal plumbing, and there he remained alien, with the Darruui digestive organ where a Terran had so many incredible feet of intestine, with the double heart and the sturdy liver just back of his three lungs.

Inside he was alien. Behind the walls of his skull, he was Aar Khiilom of the city of Helasz—a Darruui of the highest caste, a Servant of the Spirit. Externally, though, he was Major Abner Harris. He knew Major Harris' biography in great detail.

Born 2520, in Cincinnati, Ohio, United States, Earth. Age now, 42—with a good hundred years of his lifespan left. Attended Western Reserve University, studying galactography; graduated '43. Entered the Interstellar Redevelopment Corps '46, commissioned '50, now a Major. Missions to Altair VII, Sirius IX, Procyon II, Alpheratz IV. Unmarried. Parents killed in highway jet-crash in '44 ; no known relatives. Height five feet ten, weight 220, colour fair, retinal index point-oh-three.

Major Harris was visiting Earth on vacation. He was to spend eight months on Earth before reassignment to his next planetary post.

Eight months, thought the one who called himself Major Harris, would be ample time for Major Harris to lose himself in the billions of Earth and carry out the purposes for which he had been sent here.

The *Lucky Lady* was on the last lap of her journey. Harris had boarded her on Alpheratz IV, after having been shipped there from Darruu by private warship. For the past three weeks, while the giant vessel had slipped through the sleek grey tunnel in the continuum that was its overdrive channel, Harris had been learning to walk at Earthnorm gravity.

Darruu was a large world—radius 11,000 miles—and though its density was not as great as Earth's, still the gravitational attraction was half again as intense. Darruu's gravity was 1.5 Earthnorm. Or, as Harris had thought of it in the days when his mind centred not on Earth but on Darruu, Earth's gravity was .67 Darruunorm. Either way, it meant that his muscles would be functioning in a field two-thirds as strong as the one they had developed in. He could use the excuse that he had spent most of his time on heavy planets, and that would explain away some of his awkwardness.

But not all. A native Earther, no matter how long he stays on a heavy world, still knows how to cope with Earthnorm gravity. Harris had to learn that. He *did* learn it, painstakingly, during the three weeks of overdrive travel towards the system of Sol.

Now the journey was almost complete. All that remained was the transfer from the starship to an Earth shuttle, and then he could begin life as an Earthman.

Earth hung outside the main viewport twenty feet from Harris's cabin. He stared at it. A great green ball of a world, with two huge continents here, another landmass there, a giant moon moving in slow procession around it, keeping one pock-marked face eternally staring inward, the other glaring at outer space like a single beady bright eye.

The sight made Harris homesick.

Darruu was nothing like this. Darruu, from space, seemed to be a giant red fruit, covered over by the crimson mist that was the upper layer of its atmosphere. Beneath that could be discerned the great blue seas and the two hemisphere-large continents of Darraa and Darroo.

And the moons, Harris thought nostalgically. Seven glistening blank faces like coins in the sky, each at its own angle to the ecliptic, each taking its place in the sky nightly like a gem moved by clockwork. And the Mating of the Moons, when the seven came together once a year in a fiercely radiant diadem that filled half the sky—

Angrily he cut the train of thought.

*You're an Earthman. Forget Darruu.*

A voice on a speaker overhead said, "Please return to your cabins, ladies and gentlemen. In eleven minutes we will come to a rest at the main spaceborne depot. Passengers intending to transfer here please notify their area steward."



Harris returned to his cabin while the voice repeated the statement in other languages. Earth still spoke more than a dozen major tongues, which surprised him; Darruu had reached linguistic homogeneity three thousand years or more ago.

Minutes ticked by; at last came the word that the *Lucky Lady* had ended its ion-drive cruise and was tethered to the orbital satellite. Harris left his cabin for the last time and headed downramp to the designated room on D Deck where outgoing passengers were assembling.

"Your baggage will be shipped across. You don't have to worry about that."

Harris nodded. His baggage was important.

More than three hundred of the passengers were leaving ship here. Harris was herded along with the others through an airlock. Several dozen ungainly little ferries hovered just outside, linked to the huge starliner by connecting tubes. Harris entered a swaying tube, crossed over, and found a seat in the ferry. Minutes later, he was repeating the process in the other direction, as the ferry unloaded its passengers into the main airlock of Orbiting Station Number One.

Another voice boomed, "*Lucky Lady* passengers continuing on to Earth report to Routing Channel Four. *Lucky Lady* passengers continuing on to Earth report to Routing Channel Four. Passengers transshipping to other starlines should go to the nearest routing desk at once."

At routing Channel Four, Harris was called upon to produce his papers. He handed over the little fabrikoid port-folio; a spaceport official riffled sleepily through it and handed it back without a word.

As he boarded the Earth-Orbiter shuttle, an attractive stewardess handed him a multigraphed sheet of paper which contained information of a sort a tourist was likely to want to know. Harris scanned it quickly.

"*The Orbiting Station is located eighty thousand miles from Earth. It is locked in a twenty-four hour orbit that keeps it hovering approximately above Quito, Ecuador, South America. During a year the Orbiting Station serves an average of 8,500,000 travellers—*"

He finished reading the sheet and put it down. He eyed his fellow passengers in the Earthbound shuttle. There were about fifty of them.

For all he knew, five were disguised Darruui like himself. Or they might be enemies—Medlins—likewise in disguise. Perhaps he was surrounded by agents of Earth's own intelligence corps who had already penetrated his disguise.

Trouble lay on every hand. Inwardly Major Harris felt calm, though there was the faint twinge of homesickness for Darruu that he knew he would never be able entirely to erase.

The shuttle banked into a steep deceleration curve. Artificial grav aboard the ship remained constant, of course. Earth drew near.

Landing came.

The shuttle hung over the skin of the landing-field for thirty seconds, then dropped ; a gantry crane shuffled out to support the ship, and buttress-legs sprang from the sides of the hull. A steward's voice said, "Passengers will please assemble at the airlock in single file."

They assembled. A green omnibus waited outside on the field, and the fifty of them filed in. Harris found a seat by the window and stared out across the broad field. A yellow sun was in the blue sky. The air was cold ; he shivered involuntarily and drew his cloak around him for warmth.

"Cold ?" asked the man who shared his seat with him.

"A bit."

"That's odd. Nice balmy spring day like this, you'd think everybody would be enjoying the weather."

Harris grinned. "I've been on some pretty hot worlds the last ten years. Anything under ninety degrees and I start shivering, now."

The other chuckled and said, "Must be near eighty in the shade today."

"I'll be accustomed to it again before long," Harris said. "Once an Earthman, always an Earthman."

He made a mental note to carry out a trifling adjustment on his body thermostat. His skin was lined with subminiaturized heating and refrigerating units—just one of the useful modifications the surgeons had given him.

Darruu's mean temperature was 120 degrees, on the scale used by the Earthers. When it dropped to 80, Darruui cursed the cold. It was 80 now, and he was uncomfortably cold. He would have to stay that way for most of the day, at least, until in a moment of privacy he could make the necessary adjust-

ments. Around him the Earthers seemed to be perspiring and feeling discomfort because of the heat.

The bus filled finally, and spurted across the field to a high domed building of gleaming steel and green plastic. The driver said, "First stop is customs. Have your papers ready."

Inside, Harris found his baggage already waiting for him at a counter labelled HAM-HAT. There were two-suitcases, both of them with topological secret compartments. He surrendered his passport and, when told to do so, pressed his thumb to the opener-plate. The suitcases sprang open. The customs man poked through them perfunctorily, nodded, said, "Anything to declare?"

"Nothing."

"Okay. Close 'em up."

Harris locked the suitcases again, and the customs official briefly touched a tracer-stamp to them. It left no visible imprint, but the photonic scanners at every door would be watching for the radiations, and no one with an unstamped case could get through the electronic barriers.

"Next stop is Immigration, Major."

At Immigration they studied his passport briefly, noted that he was a government employee, and passed him along to Health. Here he felt a moment of alarm; about one out of every fifty incoming passengers from a starship was detained for a comprehensive medical exam, and if the finger fell upon him the game was up right here. Ten seconds in front of a fluoroscope would tell them that nobody with that kind of skeletal structure had ever been born in Cincinnati, Ohio.

He got through with nothing more than a rudimentary checkup. At the last desk his passport was stamped with a re-entry visa, and the clerk said, "You haven't been on Earth for a long time, eh, Major?"

"Not in ten years. Hope things haven't changed too much."

"The women are still the same, anyway." The clerk shuffled Harris' papers together, stuck them back in the portfolio, and handed them to him. "Everything's in order. Go straight ahead and out the door to your left."

Harris thanked him and moved along, gripping one suitcase in each hand. A month ago, at the beginning of his journey, the suitcases had seemed heavy to him. But that had been on Darruu; here they weighed only two-thirds as much. He carried them jauntily.

*Soon it will be spring on Darruu*, he thought. The red-leaved jasaar trees would blossom and their perfume would fill the air.

With an angry inner scowl he blanked out the thought. He was Major Abner Harris, late of Cincinnati, here on Earth for eight months' vacation.

He knew his orders. He was to establish residence, avoid detection, and in the second week of his stay make contact with the chief Darruui agent on Earth. Further instructions would come from him.

## Chapter II

It took twenty minutes by helitaxi to reach the metropolitan area from the spaceport. Handling the Terran currency as if he had used it all his life, Harris paid the driver, tipped him, and got out. He had asked for and been taken to a hotel in the heart of the city—the Spaceways Hotel. There was one of them in every major spaceport city in the galaxy ; the spacelines operated them jointly, for the benefit of travellers who had no place to stay on the planet of their destination.

He signed in and was given a room on the 58th floor. The Earther at the desk said, "You don't mind heights, do you, Major?"

"Not at all."

He gave the boy who had carried his bags a quarter-unit piece, received grateful thanks, and locked the door. For the first time since leaving Darruu he was really *alone*. Thumbing open his suitcases, he performed the series of complex stress-pressures that gave access to the hidden areas of the grips ; miraculously, the suitcases expanded to nearly twice their former volume. There was nothing like packing your belongings in a tesseract if you wanted to keep the customs men away from them.

Busily, he unpacked.

First thing out was a small device which fitted neatly and virtually invisibly to the inside of the door. It was a jammer for spybeams. It insured privacy.

A disruptor-pistol came next. He slipped it into his tunic-pocket. Several books ; a flask of Darruui wine ; a photograph of his birth-tree. Bringing these things had not increased his risk, since if they had been found it would only be after much more incriminating things had come to light.



The subspace communicator for example. Or the narrow-beam amplifier he would use in making known his presence to the other members of the Darruui cadre on Earth.

He finished unpacking, restored his suitcases to their three-dimensional state, and took a tiny scalpel from the toolkit he had unpacked. Quickly stripping off his trousers, he laid bare the desensitized area in the fleshy part of his thigh, stared for a moment at the network of fine silver threads underlying the flesh, and, with three careful twists of the scalpel's edge, altered the thermostatic control in his body.

He shivered a moment ; then, gradually, he began to feel warm. Closing the wound he applied nuplast ; moments later it had healed. He dressed again.

He surveyed his room. Twenty feet square, with a bed, a desk, a closet, a dresser. An air-conditioning grid in the ceiling. A steady greenish electroluminescent glow. An oval window beneath which was a set of polarizing controls. A molecular bath and washstand. Not bad for twenty units a week, he told himself, trying to think the way an Earthman might.

The room-calendar told him it was five-thirty in the afternoon, 22 May, 2562. He was not supposed to make contact with Central for ten days or more ; he computed that that would mean the first week of June. Until then he was simply to act the part of a Terran on vacation.

The surgeons had made certain minor alterations in his metabolism to give him a taste for Terran food and drink and to make it possible for him to digest the carbohydrates of which Terrans were so fond. They had prepared him well for playing the part of Major Abner Harris. And he had been equipped with fifty thousand units of Terran money, enough to last him quite a while.

Carefully he adjusted the device on the door to keep intruders out while he was gone. Anyone entering the room would get a nasty jolt of energy now. He checked his wallet, made sure he had his money with him, and pushed the door-opener.

It slid back and he stepped through into the hallway. At that moment someone walking rapidly down the hall collided with him, spinning him around. He felt a soft body pressed against his.

A woman !

The immediate reaction that boiled up in him was one of anger, but he blocked the impulse to strike her before it rose. On Darruu, a woman who jostled a Servant of the Spirit could expect a sound whipping. But this was not Darruu.

He remembered a phrase from his indoctrination : *it will help if you create a sexual relationship for yourself on Earth.*

The surgeons had changed his metabolism in that respect, too, making him able to feel sexual desires for Terran females. The theory was that no one would expect a disguised alien to engage in romantic affairs with Terrans ; it would be a form of camouflage.

"Excuse me !" Harris and the female Terran said simultaneously.

His training reminded him that simultaneous outbursts were cause for laughter on Earth. He laughed. So did she. Then she said, "I guess I didn't see you. I was hurrying along the corridor and I wasn't looking."

"The fault was mine," Harris insisted. *Terran males are obstinately chivalrous*, he had been told. "I opened my door and just charged out blind. I'm sorry."

She was tall, nearly his height, with soft, lustrous yellow hair and clear pink skin. She wore a black body-tight sheath that left her shoulders and the upper hemispheres of her breasts uncovered. Harris found her attractive. Wonderingly he thought, *Now I know they've changed me. She has hair on her scalp and yet I feel desire for her.*

She said, "It's my fault and it's your fault. That's the way most collisions are caused. Let's not argue about that. My name is Beth Baldwin."

"Major Abner Harris."

"Major?"

"Interstellar Development Corps."

"Oh," she said. "Just arrived on Earth?"

He nodded. "I'm on vacation. My last hop was Alpheratz IV." He smiled and said, "It's silly to stand out here in the hall discussing things. I was on my way down below to get something to eat. How about joining me?"

She looked doubtful for a moment, but only for a moment. She brightened. "I'm game."

They took the grav-shaft down and ate in the third-level restaurant, an automated affair with individual conveyor-belts bringing food to each table. Part of his hypnotic training had

been intended to see him through situations such as this, and so he ordered a dinner for two, complete with wine, without a hitch.

She did not seem shy. She told him that she was employed on Rigel XII, and had come to Earth on a business trip ; she had arrived only the day before. She was twenty-nine, unmarried, a native-born Earthier like himself, who had been living in the Rigel system the past four years.

"And now tell me about you," she said, reaching for the wine decanter.

"There isn't much to tell. I'm a fairly stodgy career man in the IDC, age forty-two, and this is the first day I've spent on Earth in ten years."

"It must feel strange."

"It does."

"How long is your vacation ?"

He shrugged. "Six to eight months. I can have more if I really want it. When do you go back to Rigel ?"

She smiled strangely at him. "I may not go back at all. Depends on whether I can find what I'm looking for on Earth."

"And what are you looking for ?"

She grinned. "My business," she said.

"Sorry."

"Never mind the apologies. Let's have some more wine."

After Harris had settled up the not inconsiderable matter of the bill, they left the hotel and went outside to stroll. The streets were crowded ; a clock atop a distant building told Harris that the time was shortly after seven. He felt warm now that he had adjusted his temperature controls, and the unfamiliar foods and wines in his stomach gave him an oddly queasy feeling, though he had enjoyed the meal.

The girl slipped her hand through his looped arm and squeezed the inside of his elbow. Harris grinned. He said, "I was afraid it was going to be an awfully lonely vacation."

"Me too. You can be tremendously alone on a planet that has twenty billion people on it."

They walked on. In the middle of the street a troupe of acrobats was performing, using nullgrav devices to add to their abilities. Harris chuckled and tossed them a coin, and a bronze girl saluted to him from the top of a human pyramid.

Night was falling. Harris considered the incongruity of walking arm-in-arm with an Earthgirl, with his belly full of Earth foods, and enjoying it.

Darruu seemed impossibly distant now. It lay eleven hundred light-years from Earth; its star was visible only as part of a mass of blurred dots of light.

But yet he knew it was there. He missed it.

"You're worrying about something," the girl said.

"It's an old failing of mine."

He was thinking: *I was born a Servant of the Spirit, and so I was chosen to go to Earth. I may never return to Darruu again.*

As the sky darkened they strolled on, over a delicate golden bridge spanning a river whose dark depths twinkled with myriad points of light. Together they stared down at the water, and at the stars reflected in it. She moved closer to him, and her warmth against his body was pleasing to him.

Eleven hundred light-years from home.

*Why am I here?*

He knew the answer. Titanic conflict was shaping in the universe. The Predictors held that the cataclysm was no more than two hundred years away. Darruu would stand against its ancient adversary Medlin, and all the worlds of the universe would be ranged on one side or on the other.

He was here as an ambassador. Earth was a mighty force in the galaxy—so mighty that it would resent the role it really played, that of pawn between Darruu and Medlin. Darruu wanted Terran support in the conflict to come. Obtaining it was a delicate problem in constant engineering. A cadre of disguised Darruui planted on Earth, gradually manipulating public opinion toward the Darruu camp and away from Medlin—that was the plan, and Harris, once Aar Khiilom, was one of its agents.

They walked until the hour had grown very late, and then turned back toward the hotel. Harris was confident now that he had established the sort of relationship that was likely to shield him from all suspicion of his true origin.

He said, "What do we do now?"

"Suppose we buy a bottle of something and have a party in your room?" she suggested.

"My room's a frightful mess," Harris said, thinking of the many things in there he would not want her to see. "How about yours?"

"It doesn't matter."

They stopped at an autobar and he fed half-unit pieces into a machine until the chime sounded and a fully wrapped bottle



slid out on the receiving tray. Harris tucked it under his arm, made a mock-courteous bow to her, and they continued on their way to the hotel.

The signal came just as they entered the lobby.

It reached Harris in the form of a sudden twinge in the abdomen ; that was where the amplifier had been embedded. He felt it as three quick impulses, *rasp rasp rasp*, followed after a brief pause by a repeat.

The signal had only one meaning : *Emergency. Get in touch with your contact-man at once.*

Her hand tightened on his arm. "Are you all right ? You look so pale !"

In a dry voice he said, "Maybe we'd better postpone our party a few minutes. I'm—not quite well."

"Oh ! Can I help ?"

He shook his head. "It's—something I picked up on Alpheratz." Turning, he handed her the packaged bottle and said, "It'll just take me a few minutes to get myself settled down. Suppose you go to your room and wait for me there."

"But if you're sick I ought to—"

"No. Beth, I have to take care of this myself, without anyone else watching. Okay ?"

"Okay," she said doubtfully.

"Thanks. Be with you as soon as I can."

They rode the gravshaft together to the 58th floor and went their separate ways, she to her room, he to his. The signal in his abdomen was repeating itself steadily now with quiet urgency : *Rasp rasp rasp. Rasp rasp rasp. Rasp rasp rasp.*

He neutralized the force-field on the door with a quick energy impulse and opened the door. Stepping inside quickly, he activated the spybeam jammer again. Beads of sweat were starting to form on his skin.

*Rasp rasp rasp. Rasp rasp rasp.*

He opened the closet, took out the tiny narrow-beam amplifier he had hidden there, and tuned it to the frequency of the emergency signal. Immediately the rasping stopped as the narrow-beam amplifier covered the wavelength.

Moments passed. The amplifier picked up a voice speaking in the code devised for use by Darruui agents alone.

"Identify yourself."

Harris identified himself according to the regular procedure. He went on to say, "I arrived on Earth today. My instructions were not to report to you for about two weeks."

"I know that. There's an emergency situation."

"What kind of emergency?"

"There are Medlin agents on Earth. Normal procedures will have to be altered. Meet me at once." He gave an address. Harris memorized it and repeated it. The contact was broken.

*Meet me at once.* The orders had to be interpreted literally. *At once* meant right now, not tomorrow afternoon. His tryst with the yellow-haired Earthgirl would just have to wait.

He picked up the housephone and asked for her room. A moment later he heard her voice.

"Hello?"

"Beth, this is Abner Harris."

"How are you? Everything under control? I'm waiting for you."

Hesitantly he said, "I'm fine now. But—Beth, I don't know how to say this—will you believe me when I say that a friend of mine just phoned, and wants me to meet him right away downtown?"

"Now? But it's after eleven!"

"I know. He's—a strange sort."

"I thought you didn't have any friends on Earth, Major Harris. You said you were lonely."

"He's not really a *friend*. He's a business associate. From IDC."

"Well, I'm not accustomed to having men stand me up. But I don't have any choice, do I?"

"Good girl. Make it a date for breakfast in the morning instead?"

"Lousy substitute, but it'll have to do. See you at nine."

### Chapter III

The rendezvous-point the other operative named was a street corner in another quarter of the city. Harris hired a helitaxi to take him there.

It was a nightclub district, all bright lights and brassy music. A figure leaned against the lamppost on the southeast corner of the street. Harris crossed to him. In the brightness of the streetlamp he saw the man's face: lean, lantern-jawed, solemn.

Harris said, "Pardon me, friend. Do you know where I can buy a mask for the carnival?"

It was the recognition-query. The other answered, in a deep harsh voice, "Masks are expensive. Stay home." He thrust out his hand.

Harris took it, gripping the wrist in the Darruui way, and grinned. Eleven hundred light-years from home and he beheld a fellow Servant of the Spirit! "I'm Major Abner Harris."

"Hello. I'm John Carver. There's a table waiting for us inside."

"Inside" turned out to be the Nine Planets Club, across the street. The atmosphere inside was steamy and smoke-clouded; bubbles of light drifted round the ceiling. A row of long-limbed nudes pranced gaily to the accompaniment of the noise that passed for music on Terra. The surgeons, Harris thought, had never managed to instil a liking for Terran music in him.

Carver said quietly, "Have you had any trouble since you arrived?"

"No. Should I expect any?"

The lean man shrugged. "There are one hundred Medlin agents on Earth right now. Yesterday we discovered a cache of secret Medlin documents. We have the names of the hundred and their photographs. We also know they plan to wipe us out."

"How many Darruui are on Earth?"

"You are the tenth to arrive."

Harris' eyes widened. One hundred Medlins against ten Darruui! "Stiff odds," he said.

Carver nodded. "But we know their identities. We can strike first. Unless we eliminate them, we will not be able to proceed with our work here."

The music reached an ear-splitting crescendo. Moodily Harris stared at the chorus-line as it gyrated. He sensed some glandular disturbance at the sight, and frowned. By Darruui standards, the girls were obscenely ugly.

But this was not Darruu.

He said, "How do we go about eliminating them?"

"You have weapons. I'll supply you with the necessary information. If you can get ten of them before they get you, you'll be all right." He drew forth a billfold and extracted a snapshot from it. "Here's your first one, now. Kill her and report back to me. You can find her at the Spaceways Hotel."

Harris felt a jolt. "I'm staying at that hotel."

"Indeed? Here. Look at the picture."

Harris took the photo from the other. It was a tridim in full

colour. It showed a blonde girl wearing a low-cut black sheath.

Controlling his voice, he said, "This girl's too pretty to be a Medlin agent."

"That's why she's so deadly," Carver said. "Kill her first. She goes under the name of Beth Baldwin."

Harris stared at the photo a long while. Then he nodded. "Okay. I'll get in touch with you again when the job's done."

It was nearly two in the morning when he returned to the hotel. He had spent nearly an hour with the man who called himself John Carver. He felt tired, confused, faced with decisions that frightened him.

Beth Baldwin a Medlin spy? How improbable that seemed! But yet Carver had had her photo.

It was his job to kill her, now. He was a Servant of the Spirit. He could not betray his trust.

*First I'll find out for certain, though.*

He took the gravshaft to the 58th floor, but instead of going to his room he turned left and headed toward the room whose number she had given him—5820. He paused a moment, then nudged the door-signal.

There was no immediate response, so he nudged it again. This time he heard the sound of a doorscanner humming just above him, telling him that she was awake and just within the door.

He said, "It's me—Abner. I have to see you, Beth."

"Hold on," came the sleepy reply from inside. "Let me get something on."

A moment passed, and then the door slid open. Beth smiled at him. She had "put something on," but the something had not been much—a flimsy gown that concealed her body as if she were wearing so much gauze.

But Harris was not interested in her body just now, attractive though it was. She held a tiny glittering weapon in her hand. Harris recognized the weapon. It was the Medlin version of the disruptor-pistol.

"Come on in, Abner."

Numbly he stepped forward, and the door shut behind him. Beth gestured with the disruptor.

"Sit down over there."

"How come the gun, Beth?"



"You know that answer without my having to tell it to you. Now that you've seen Carver, you know who I am."

He nodded. "A Medlin agent."

It was hard to believe. He stared at the girl who stood ten feet from him, a disruptor trained at his skull. The Medlin surgeons evidently were as skilful as those of Darruu, it seemed, for the wiry pebble-skinned Medlins were even less humanoid than the Darruui—and yet he would swear that her figure, the flaring hips, the long well-formed legs, were genuine.

She said, "We had information on you from the moment you entered the orbit of Earth, Abner—or should I say Aar Khiilom?"

"How did you know that name?"

She laughed lightly. "The same way I knew you were from Darruu, the same way I knew the exact moment you were going to come out of your room before."

"The same way you knew I was coming here to kill you just now?"

She nodded.

Harris frowned. "Medlins aren't telepathic. There isn't a single telepathic race in the galaxy."

"None that *you* know about, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," she said.

He shrugged. Apparently the Medlin spy system was formidably well organized. This nonsense about telepathy was merely to cloud the trail. But the one fact about which there was no doubt was—

"I came here to kill you," Harris said. "But you trapped me. I guess you'll kill me now."

"Wrong. I just want to talk," she said.

"If you want to talk, put some clothing on. Having you sitting around like this disturbs my powers of conversation."

She said pleasantly, "Oh? You mean this artificial body of mine stirs some response in that artificial body of yours? How interesting!" Without turning her back on him, she drew a robe from the closet and slipped it on over the filmy gown. "There. Is that easier on your glandular balance?"

"Somewhat."

The Darruui began to fidget. There was no way he could activate his emergency signal without moving his hands, and any sudden handmotion was likely to be fatal. He sat motion-

less while sweat streamed down the skin they had grafted to his own.

Beth said, "You're one of ten Darruui on Earth. Others are on their way, but there are only ten of you here now. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"Why should I?" Harris said tightly.

She nodded. "A good point. But I assure you we have all the information about you we need, so you needn't try to make up tales. To continue: you and your outfit are here for the purpose of subverting Terran allegiance and winning Earth over to the side of Darruu."

"And you Medlins are here for much the same kind of reason."

"That's where you're wrong," the girl said. "We're here to help the Terrans, not to dominate them. We Medlins don't believe in violence if peaceful means will accomplish our goals."

"Very nice words," Harris said. "But how can *you* help the Terrans?"

"It's a matter of genetics. This isn't the place to explain in detail."

He let that pass. "So you deliberately threw yourself in contact with me earlier, let me take you out to dinner, walked around arm-in arm—and all this time you knew I was a disguised Darruui?"

"Of course. I also knew that when you pretended to be sick it was because you had to contact your chief operative, and that when you said you were going to visit a friend you were attending an emergency rendezvous. I also knew what your friend Carver was going to tell you to do, which is why I had my gun ready when you rang."

He stared at her. "Suppose I *hadn't* received that emergency message. We were going to come here and drink and probably make love. Would you have allowed that even knowing what you knew?"

"Most likely," she said without emotion. "It would have been interesting to see what sort of biological reactions the Darruui surgeons are capable of building."

A flash of hatred ran through Harris-Khiilom. He had been raised to hate Medlins anyway; they were the ancestral enemies of his people, galactic rivals for four thousand years or more. Only the fact that she was clad in the flesh of a

handsome Earthgirl had kept Harris from feeling his normal revulsion for a Medlin.

But now it surged forth at this revelation of her calm and callous biological "curiosity."

He wondered how far her callousness extended. Also, how good her aim was.

He mastered his anger and said, "That's a pretty cold-blooded way of thinking, Beth."

"Maybe. I'm sorry about it."

"I'll bet you are."

She smiled at him. "Let's forget about that, shall we? I want to tell you a few things."

"Such as?"

"For one: did you know that you're fundamentally disloyal to the Darruui cause?"

Harris laughed harshly. "You're crazy!"

"Afraid not. Listen to me, Abner. You're homesick for Darruu. You never wanted to come here in the first place. You were born into a caste that has certain obligations, and you're fulfilling those obligations. But you don't know very much about what you're doing here on Earth, and for half a plugged unit you'd give the whole thing up and go back to Darruu."

"Very clever," he said stonily. "Now give me my horoscope for the next six months."

"Easy enough. You'll come to our headquarters and learn why my people are on Earth—"

"I know that one already."

"You *think* you do," she said smoothly. "Don't interrupt. You'll learn why we're on Earth; once you've seen that, you'll join us and help to protect Earth against Darruu."

"And why will I do all these incredible things?"

"Because it's in your personality makeup to do them. And because you're falling in love."

"With a lot of fake female flesh plastered over a scrawny Medlin body? Hah!"

She remained calm. Harris measured the distance between them, wondering whether she would use the weapon after all. A disruptor broiled the neural tissue; death was instantaneous and fairly ghastly.

He decided to risk it. His assignment was to kill Medlins, not to let himself be killed by them. He had nothing to lose by making the attempt.

In a soft voice he said, "You didn't answer. Do you really think I'd fall in love with something like *you*?"

"Biologically we're Earthers now, not Medlins or Darruui. It's possible."

"Maybe you're right. After all, I *did* ask you to cover yourself up." He smiled and said, "I'm all confused. I need time to think things over."

"Of course. You—"

He sprang from the chair and covered the ten feet between them in two big bounds, stretching out one hand to grab the hand that held the disruptor. He deflected the weapon toward the ceiling. She did not fire. He closed on her wrist and forced her to drop the tiny pistol. Pressed against her, he stared into eyes blazing with anger.

The anger melted suddenly into passion. He stepped back, reaching for his own gun, not willing to have such close contact with her. She was too dangerous. Better to kill her right now, he thought. She's just a Medlin. A deadly one.

He started to draw the weapon from his tunic. Suddenly she lifted her hand; there was the twinkle of something bright between her fingers, and then Harris recoiled, helpless, as the bolt of a stunner struck him in the face like a club against the back of his skull.

She fired again. He struggled to get his gun out, but his muscles would not obey.

He toppled forward, paralyzed.

## Chapter IV

Harris felt a teeth-chattering chill as he began to come awake. The stunner-bolt had temporarily overloaded his motor neurons, and the body's escape from the frustration of paralysis was unconsciousness. Now he was waking, and the strength was ebbing slowly and painfully back into his muscles.

The light of morning streamed in through a depolarized window on the left wall of the unfamiliar room in which he found himself. He felt stiff and sore all over, and realized he had spent the night—where?—

He groped in his pockets. His weapons were gone; they had left his wallet.

He got unsteadily to his feet and surveyed the room. The window was beyond his reach; there was no sign of a door.



Obviously some section of the wall folded away to admit people to the room, but the door and door-jamb, wherever they were, must have been machined as smoothly as a couple of joblocks, because there was no sign of a break in the wall.

He looked up. There was a grid in the ceiling. Air-conditioning, no doubt—and probably a spy-mechanism also. He stared at the grid and said, "Okay. I'm awake now. You can come and work me over."

There was no immediate response. Surreptitiously Harris slipped a hand inside his waistband and squeezed a fold of flesh between his thumb and index finger. The action set in operation a minute amplifier embedded there; a distress signal, directionally modulated, was sent out to any Darruui agent, who might be within a thousand-mile radius. He completed the gesture by lazily scratching his chest, stretching, yawning.

He waited.

Finally a segment of the door flipped upward out of sight, and three figures entered.

He recognized one of them: Beth. She smiled at him and said, "Good morning, Major."

Harris glared sourly at her. Behind her stood two males—one an ordinary-looking sort of Earther, the other rather special. He was about six feet six, well-proportioned for his height, with a regularity of feature that seemed startlingly beautiful.

Beth said, "Major Abner Harris, formerly Aar Khiilom of Darruu—this is Paul Coburn of Medlin Intelligence and David Wrynn of Earth."

"A real Earthman? Not a phony like the rest of us?"

Wrynn smiled pleasantly and said, "I assure you I'm a home-grown product, Major Harris." His voice was like the mellow boom of a well-tuned cello.

The Darruui folded his arms. "Well. How nice of you to introduce us all. Now what?"

"Still belligerent," he heard Beth murmur to the other Medlin, Coburn. Coburn nodded. The giant Earthman merely looked unhappy in a calm sort of way.

Harris eyed them all coldly. "If you're going to torture me, why not get started with it?"

"Who said anything about torture?" Beth asked.

"Why else would you bring me here? Obviously you want to wring information from me. Well, go ahead. I'm ready for you."

Coburn chuckled and fingered his double chins. "Don't you think we know that torture's useless on you? That if we tried any kind of forcible neural extraction of information from your mind your memory-chambers would automatically short-circuit?"

Harris' jaw dropped. "How did you know—" He stopped. The Medlins evidently had a fantastically efficient spy service. The filter-circuit in his brain was a highly secret development.

Beth said, "Relax and listen to us. We aren't out to torture you we know already all you can tell us."

"Doubtful. But go ahead and talk."

"We know how many Darruui are on Earth. And we know approximately where they are. We'd like you to serve as a contact man for us."

"And do what?"

"Kill the other nine Darruui on Earth," Beth said simply.

Harris smiled. "Is there any special reason why I should do this?"

"For the good of the universe."

He laughed derisively. "For the good of Medlin, you mean."

"No. Listen to me. When we arrived on Earth—it was years ago, by the way—we quickly discovered that a new race was evolving here. A super-race, you might say. One with abnormal physical and mental powers. But in most cases children of this new race were killed or mentally stunted before they reached maturity. People tend to resent being made obsolete—and even a super-child is unable to defend himself until he's learned how. By then it's usually too late."

It was a nice fairy-tale, Harris thought. He made no comment, but listened with apparent interest.

Beth continued, "We discovered isolated members of this new race here and there on Earth. We decided to *help* them—knowing they would help us, some day, when it became necessary. We protected these children. We brought them together and raised them in safety. David Wrynn here is one of our first discoveries."

Harris glanced at the big Earthman. "So you're a super-man?"

Wrynn smiled. "I'm somewhat better equipped for life than most other Earthmen. My children will be as far beyond me as I am beyond my parents."

"Our purpose here on Earth is to aid this evolving race until it's capable of taking care of itself—which won't be too long now. There are more than a hundred of them, of which thirty are adult. But now Darruui agents have started to arrive on Earth. Their purpose is to obstruct us, to interfere with our actions, and to win Earth over to what they think is their 'cause.' They don't see that they're backing a dead horse."

"Tell me," Harris said. "What's your motive in bringing into being this super-race?"

"Motive?" Beth said. "You Darruui always think in terms of motives, don't you? Profit and reward. Major, there's nothing in this for us but the satisfaction of knowing that we're bringing something wonderful into being in the universe."

Harris swallowed that with much salt. The concept of altruism was not unknown on Darruu, certainly, but it seemed highly improbable that a planet would go to the trouble of sending emissaries across space for the sole purpose of serving as midwives to an emerging race of super-beings on Earth.

No, he thought. It was simply part of an elaborate propaganda manoeuvre whose motives did not lie close to the surface. There were no supermen. Wrynn was probably a Medlin himself, on whom the surgeons had done a specially good job.

Whatever the Medlins' motive, he determined to play along with them. By now Carver had probably picked up his distress signal and had worked out the location of the place where he was being held.

He said, "So you're busily raising a breed of super-Earthmen, and you want me to help? How?"

"We told you. By disposing of your comrades before they make things complicated for us."

"You're asking me to commit treason against my people, in other words."

"We knew what sort of a man you are," Beth said. "You aren't in sympathy with the Darruui imperialistic ideals. You may *think* you are, but you aren't."

*I'll play along*, Harris thought. He said, "You're right. I didn't want to take the job on Earth in the first place. What can I do to help?"

Coburn and Beth exchanged glances. The "Earthman" Wrynn merely smiled.

Beth said, "I knew you'd co-operate. The first target is the man who calls himself Carver. Get rid of him and the Darruui agents are without a nerve-centre. After him, the other eight will be easy targets."

"How do you know I won't trick you once you've released me?" Harris said.

Coburn said, "We have ways of keeping watch."

Harris nodded. "I'll go after Carver first. I'll get in touch with you as soon as he's out of the way."

It seemed too transparent, Harris thought, when they had set him loose. He found himself in a distant quarter of the city, nearly an hour's journey by helitaxi from his hotel.

All this talk of supermen and altruism! It made no sense, he thought—but Medlin propaganda was devious stuff, and he had good reason to distrust it.

Were they as simple as all that, though, to release him merely on this promise of good faith? If they were truly altruistic, of course, it made sense; but he knew the Medlins too well to believe that. Darkly he thought he must be part of some larger Medlin plan.

Well, let Carver worry about it, he thought.

Though he was hungry, he knew he had no time to bother about breakfast until he got in touch with the Darruui chief agent. He signalled for a helitaxi and gave his destination as the Spaceways Hotel.

When he finally arrived, fifty minutes later, he headed straight for his room, activated the narrow-beam communicator, and waited until the metallic voice from the speaker said in code, "Carver here."

"Harris speaking."

"You've escaped?"

"They set me free. It's a long story. Did you get a directional fix on the building?"

"Yes. Why did they let you go?"

"I promised to become a Medlin secret agent," Harris said.

"My first assignment is to assassinate you."

The chuckle that came from the speaker grid held little mirth. Carver said, "Fill me in on everything that's happened to you since last night."

"For one thing, the Medlins know *everything*. When I went to visit the girl last night she was waiting for me with a gun. She stunned me and carted me off to the Medlin headquarters.



When I woke up they gave me some weird line about raising a breed of super-Earthmen, and would I help them in this noble cause?"

"You agreed?"

"Of course. They let me go and I'm supposed to eradicate all the Darruui on Earth, beginning with you."

"The others are well scattered," Carver said.

"They seem to know where they are."

Carver was silent for a moment. Then he said, "We'll have to strike at once. We'll attack the Medlin headquarters and kill as many as we can. Do you really think they trust you?"

"Either that or they're using me as bait for an elaborate trap," Harris said.

"That's more likely. Well, we'll take their bait. Only they won't be able to handle us once they've caught hold of us."

Carver broke contact. Carefully Harris packed the equipment away again.

He breakfasted in the hotel restaurant after a prolonged session under the molecular showerbath to remove the fatigue and grime of his night's imprisonment. The meal was close to tasteless, but he needed the nourishment.

Returning to his room, he locked himself in and threw himself wearily on the bed. He was tired and deeply troubled.

Supermen, he thought.

Did it make sense for the Medlins to rear a possible galactic conqueror? Earthmen were dangerous enough as it was; though the spheres of galactic influence still were divided as of old between Darruu and Medlin, the Earthmen in their bare three hundred years of galactic contact had taken giant strides toward holding a major place in the affairs of the universe.

Their colonies stretched halfway across the galaxy. The Interstellar Development Corps of which he claimed to be a member had planted Earthmen indiscriminately on any uninhabited world of the galaxy that was not claimed by Darruu or Medlin.

And the Medlins, the ancient enemies of his people, the race he had been taught all his life to regard as the embodiment of evil—these were aiding Earthmen to progress to a plane of development far beyond anything either Darruu or Medlin had attained?

Ridiculous, he thought. No race breeds its own destruction knowingly. And the Medlins are no fools.

Certainly not fools enough to let me go on a mere promise that I'll turn traitor and aid them, he thought.

He shook his head. After a while he uncorked his precious flask of Darruui wine and poured a small quantity. The velvet-textured dark wine of his homeworld soothed him a little, but the ultimate result was simply to increase his already painful longing for home. Soon, he thought, it would be harvest-time, and the first bottles of new wine would reach the shops. This would be the first year that he had not tasted the year's vintage while it still held the bouquet of youth.

Instead I find myself on a strange planet in a strange skin, caught up in the coils of the devil Medlins. He scowled darkly, and took another sip of wine to ease the ache his heart felt.

### Chapter V

A day of nerve-twisting inactivity passed. Harris did not hear from Carver, nor did any of the Medlins contact him. Once he checked Beth Baldwin's room at the hotel, but no one answered the door, and when he inquired at the desk he learned that she had moved out earlier in the day, leaving no forwarding address. It figured. She had established quarters in the hotel only long enough to come in touch with him, and, that done, had left.

Regretfully Harris wished he had had a chance to try that biological experiment with her, after all. Medlin though she was, his body was now Terran-oriented, and it might have been an interesting experience. Well, no chance for that now.

He ate alone, in the hotel restaurant, and kept close to his room all day. Towards evening his signal-amplifier buzzed. He activated the communicator and spoke briefly with Carver, who gave him an address and ordered him to report there immediately.

It was a shabby, old-fashioned building far to the east, at the edge of the river. He rode up eight stories in a gravshaft that vibrated so badly he expected to be hurled back down at any moment and made his way down a poorly-lit dusty corridor to a weather-beaten door that gave off the faint yellow glow that indicated a protection-field.

Harris felt the gentle tingling in his stomach that told him he was getting a radionic scanning. Finally the door opened. Carver said to him, "Come in."

There were four others in the room—a pudgy balding man named Reynolds, a youthful smiling man who called himself Tompkins, a short, cold-eyed man introduced as McDermott, and a lanky fellow who spoke his name drawlingly as Patterson. As each of them in turn was introduced, he gave the Darruui recognition signal.

“The other four of us are elsewhere in the eastern hemisphere of Earth,” Carver said. “But six should be enough to handle the situation.”

Harris glanced at his five comrades. “What are you planning to do?”

“Attack the Medlins, of course. We’ll have to wipe them out at once.”

Harris nodded. Inwardly he felt troubled; it seemed to him now that the Medlins had been strangely sincere in releasing him, though he knew that that was preposterous. He said, “How?”

“They trust you. You’re one of their agents, so far as they think.”

“Right.”

“You’ll return to them and tell them you’ve disposed of me, as instructed. Only you’ll be bearing a subsonic on your body. Once you’re inside, you activate it and knock them out—you’ll be shielded.”

“And I kill them when they’re unconscious?”

“Exactly,” Carver said. “You can’t be humane with Medlins. It’s like being humane with bloodsucking bats or with snakes.”

The Darruui called McDermott said, “We’ll wait outside until we get the signal that you’ve done the job. If you need help, just let us know.”

Harris moistened his lips and nodded. “It sounds all right.”

Carver said, “Reynolds, insert the subsonic.”

The bald man produced a small pellet the size of a tiny bead, from which three tantalum filaments projected. He indicated to Harris that he should roll up his trousers to the thigh.

Instead, Harris dropped them. Reynolds drew a scalpel from somewhere and lifted the flap of nerveless flesh that served as trapdoor to the network of devices underneath. With steady, unquivering fingers, he affixed the bead to the minute wires already set in Harris’ leg, and closed the wound with nuplast.

Carver said, "You activate it by pressing against the left-hip neural nexus. It's self-shielding for a distance of three feet around you, so make sure none of your victims are any closer than that."

"It radiates a pretty potent subsonic," Reynolds said. "Guaranteed knockout for a radius of forty feet."

"Suppose the Medlins are shielded against subsonics?" Harris asked.

Carver chuckled. "This is a variable-cycle transmitter. If they've perfected anything that can shield against a random wave, we might as well give up right now. But I'm inclined to doubt they have."

All very simple, Harris thought as he rode across town to the Medlin Headquarters. Simply walk in, smile politely, stun them all with the subsonic, and boil their brains with your disruptor.

He paused outside the building, thinking.

Around him, Earthmen hurried to their homes. Night was falling. The stars blanketed the sky, white flecks against dark cloth. Many of those stars swore allegiance to Darruu. Others, to Medlin.

Which was right? Which wrong?

A block away, five fellow-Darruui lurked, ready to come to his aid if he had any trouble in killing the Medlins. He doubted that he would have trouble, if the subsonic were as effective as Carver seemed to think.

For forty Darruui years he had been trained to hate the Medlins. Now, in a few minutes, he would be doing what was considered the noblest act a Servant of the Spirit could perform—ridding the universe of a pack of them. Yet he felt no sense of anticipated glory. It would simply be murder, the murder of strangers.

He entered the building.

The Medlin headquarters were at the top of the building, in a large penthouse loft. He rode up in the gravshaft and it seemed to him that he could feel the pressure of the tiny subsonic generator in his thigh. He knew that was just an illusion, but the presence of the metal bead irritated him all the same.

He stood for a moment in a scanner field. A door flicked back suddenly out of sight, and a strange face peered at him—an Earthman face, on the surface of things at least.



The Earthman beckoned him in.

"I'm Armin Moulton," he said in a deep voice. "You're Harris?"

"That's right."

"Beth is waiting to see you."

*The subsonic has a range of forty feet in any direction, Harris thought. No one should be closer to you than three feet.*

He was shown into an inner room well furnished with drapes and hangings. Beth stood in the middle of the room, smiling at him. She wore thick, shapeless clothes, quite unlike the seductive garb she had had on when Harris first collided with her.

There were others in the room. Harris recognized the other Medlin, Coburn and the giant named Wrynn who claimed to be a super-Earthman. There was another woman of Wrynn's size in the room, a great golden creature nearly a foot taller than Harris, and two people of normal size who were probably Medlins.

"Well?" Beth asked.

In a tight voice Harris said, "He's dead. I've just come from there."

"How did you carry it out?"

"Disruptor," Harris said. "It was—unpleasant. For me as well as him."

He was quivering with tension. He made no attempt to conceal it, since a man who had just killed his direct superior might be expected to show some signs of extreme tension.

"Eight to go," Coburn said. "And four are in another hemisphere."

"Who are these people?" Harris asked.

Beth introduced them. The two normal-sized ones were disguised Medlins; the giant girl was Wrynn's wife, a super-woman. Harris frowned thoughtfully. There were a hundred Medlin agents on Earth. Four of them were right in this room, and it was reasonable to expect that two or three more might be within the forty-foot range of the concealed subsonic.

Not a bad haul at all. Harris began to tremble.

Beth said, "I suppose you don't even know who and where the other Darruui are yourself, do you?"

Harris shook his head. "I've only been on Earth a couple of days, you know. There wasn't time to make contact with anyone but Carver. I have no idea how to do so."

He stared levelly at her. The expression on her face was unreadable ; it was impossible to tell whether she believed he had actually killed Carver.

" Things have happened fast to you, haven't they ?" she said. She drew a tridim photo from a case and handed it to Harris. " This is your next victim. He goes under the name of Reynolds here. He's the second-in-command ; first-in-command now, since Carver's dead."

Harris studied the photo. It showed the face of the bald-headed man who had inserted the subsonic beneath the skin of his thigh.

Tension mounted in him. He felt the faint *rasp rasp rasp* in his stomach that was the agreed-upon code ; Carver, waiting nearby, wanted to know if he were having any trouble.

Casually Harris kneaded his side, activating the transmitter. The signal he sent out told Carver that nothing had happened yet, that everything was all right.

He handed the photo back to Beth.

" I'll take care of him," he said.

*I press the neural nexus in the left hip and render them unconscious. Then I kill them with the disruptor and leave.*

*Very simple.*

He looked at Beth and thought that in a few minutes she would lie dead, along with Coburn and the other two Medlins and these giants who claimed to be Earthmen. He tensed. His hand stole toward his hip.

Beth said, " It must have been a terrible nervous strain, killing him. You look very disturbed."

" You've overturned all the values of my life," Harris said glibly. " That can shake a man up."

" You didn't think I'd succeed !" Beth said triumphantly to Coburn. To Harris she explained, " Coburn didn't think you could be trusted."

" I can't," Harris said bluntly.

He activated the concealed subsonic.

The first waves of inaudible sound rippled out, ignoring false flesh and striking through to the Medlin core beneath. Protected by his three-foot shield, Harris nevertheless felt sick to the stomach, rocked by the reverberating sound-waves that poured from the pellet embedded in his thigh.

Coburn was reaching for his weapon, but he never got to it. His arm drooped slackly ; he slumped over. Beth dropped.

The other two Medlins fell. Still the subsonic waves poured forth.

To his surprise Harris saw that the two giants still remained on their feet and semi-conscious, if groggy. *It must be because they're so big*, he thought. *It takes longer for the subsonic to knock them out.*

Wrynn was sagging now. His wife reeled under the impact of the noiseless waves and slipped to the floor followed a moment later by her husband.

The office was silent.

Harris pressed his side again, signalling the *all clear* to the five Darruui outside. Six unconscious forms lay awkwardly on the floor.

He found the switch that opened the door, pulled it down, and peered out into the hall. Three figures lay outside, unconscious. A fourth was running toward them from the far end of the long hall, shouting, "What happened? What's going on?"

Harris stared at him. The Medlin ran into the forty-foot zone and recoiled visibly; he staggered forward a few steps and fell, joining his comrades on the thick velvet carpet.

Ten of them, Harris thought.

He drew the disruptor.

It lay in his palm, small, deadly. The trigger was a thin strand of metal; he needed only to flip off the guard, press the trigger back, and watch the Medlins die. But his hand was shaking. He did not fire.

A silent voice said, *You could not be trusted after all. You were a traitor. But we had to let the test go at least this far, for the sake of our consciences.*

"Who said that?"

*I did.*

"Where are you? I don't see you."

*In this room*, came the reply. *Put down the gun, Harris-Khiilom. No, don't try to signal your friends. Just let the gun fall.*

As if it had been wrenched from his hand, the gun dropped from his fingers, bounced a few inches, and lay still.

*Shut off the subsonic*, came the quiet command. *I find it unpleasant.*

Obediently Harris deactivated the instrument. His mind was held in some strange stasis; he had no private volitional control.

"Who are you?"

*A member of that super-race whose existence you refused to accept.*

The Silent Invaders.

Galley 10.

Harris looked at Wrynn and his wife. Both were unconscious. "Wrynn?" he said. "How can your mind function if you're unconscious?"

## Chapter VI

Gently Harris felt himself falling toward the floor. It was as if an intangible hand had yanked his legs out from under him and eased him down. He lay quiescent, eyes open, neither moving nor wanting to move.

The victims of the subsonic slowly returned to consciousness as the minutes passed.

Beth woke first. She stared at the unconscious form of Wrynn's wife and said, "You went to quite an extent to prove a point!"

*You were in no danger, came the answer.*

The others were awakening now, sitting up, rubbing their foreheads. Harris watched them. His head throbbed too, as if he had been stunned by the subsonic device himself.

"Suppose you had been knocked out by the subsonic too?" Beth said to the life within the giant woman. "He would have killed us."

*The subsonic could not affect me.*

Harris said, "That—embryo can think and act?" His voice was a harsh whisper.

Beth nodded. "The next generation. It reaches sentience while still in the womb. By the time it's born it's fully aware."

"And I thought it was a hoax," Harris said dizzily. He felt dazed. The values of his life had been shattered in a moment, and it would not be easy to repair them with similar speed.

"No. No hoax. And we knew you'd try to trick us when we let you go. At least, Wrynn said you would. He's telepathic too, though he can only receive impressions. He can't transmit telepathically to others the way his son can."

"If you knew what I'd do, why did you release me?" Harris asked.

Beth said, "Call it a test. I hoped you might change your beliefs if we let you go. You didn't."



"No. I came here to kill you."

"We knew that the moment you stepped through the door. But the seed of rebellion was in you. We hoped you might be swayed. You failed us."

Harris bowed his head. The signal in his body rasped again, but he ignored it. *Let Carver sweat out there. This thing is bigger than anything Carver ever dreamed of.*

"Tell me," he said. "Don't you know what will happen to Medlin—and the Darruu as well—once there are enough of these beings?"

"Nothing will happen. Do you think they're petty power-seekers, intent on establishing a galactic dominion?" The girl laughed derisively. "That sort of thinking belongs to the obsolete non-telepathic species. Us. The lower animals. These new people have different goals."

"But they wouldn't have come into existence if you Medlins hadn't aided them!" Harris protested. "Obsolete? Of course. And you've done it!"

Beth smiled oddly. "At least we were capable of seeing the new race without envy. We helped them as much as we could because we knew they would prevail anyway, given time. Perhaps it would be another century, or another millenium. But our day is done, and so is the day of Darruu, and the day of the non-telepathic Earthmen."

"And our day too," Wrynn said mildly. "We are the intermediates—the links between the old species and the new one that is emerging."

Harris stared at his hands—the hands of an Earthman, with Darruui flesh within.

He thought : *All our striving is for nothing.*

A new race, a glorious race, nurtured by the Medlins, brought into being on Earth. The galaxy waited for them. They were demigods.

He had regarded the Earthers as primitives, creatures with a mere few thousand years of history behind them, mere pale humanoids of no importance. But he was wrong. Long after Darruu had become a hollow world, these Earthers would roam the galaxies.

Looking up, he said, "I guess we made a mistake, we of Darruu. I was sent here to help sway the Earthers to the side of Darruu. But it's the other way round ; it's Darruu that will have to swear loyalty to Earth, some day."

"Not soon," Wrynn said. "The true race is not yet out of childhood. Twenty years more must pass. And we have enemies on Earth."

"The old Earthmen," Coburn said. "How do you think they'll like being replaced? *They're* the real enemy. And that's why we're here. To help the mutants until they can stand fully alone. You Darruui are just nuisances getting in our way."

That would have been cause for anger, once. Harris merely shrugged. His whole mission had been without purpose.

But yet, a lingering doubt remained, a last suspicion. The silent voice of the unborn superman said, *He still is not convinced.*

"I'm afraid he's right," Harris murmured. "I see, and I believe—and yet all my conditioning tells me that it's impossible. Medlins are hateful creatures; I *know* that, intuitively."

Beth smiled. "Would you like a guarantee of our good faith?"

"What do you mean?"

To the womb-bound godling she said, "Link us."

Before Harris had a chance to react a strange brightness flooded over him; he seemed to be floating far above his body. With a jolt he realized where he was.

He was looking into the mind of the Medlin who called herself Beth Baldwin. And he saw none of the hideous things he had expected to find in a Medlin mind.

He saw faith and honesty, and a devotion to the truth. He saw many thing that filled him with humility.

The linkage broke.

Beth said, "Now find the mind of his leader Carver, and link him to *that*."

"No," Harris protested. "Don't—"

It was too late.

He sensed the smell of Darruu wine, and the prickly texture of thuuar spines, and then the superficial memories parted to give him a moment's insight into the deeper mind of the Darruui who wore the name of John Carver.

It was a frightening pit of foul hatreds. Shivering, Harris staggered backward, realizing that the Earther had allowed him only a fraction of a second's entry into that mind.

He covered his face with his hands.

"Are—we all like that?" he asked. "Am I?"

"No. Not—deep down," Beth said. "You've got the outer layer of hatred that every Darruui has—and every Medlin. But your core is good. Carver is rotten. So are the other Darruui here."

"Our races have fought for centuries," Coburn said. "A mistake on both sides that has hardened into blood-hatred. The time has come to end it."

"How about those Darruui outside?"

"They must die," Beth said.

Harris was silent a moment. The five who waited for him were Servants of the Spirit, like himself; members of the highest caste of Darruui civilization, presumably the noblest of all creation's beings. To kill one was to set himself apart from Darruu for ever.

"My—conditioning lies deep," he said. "If I strike a blow against them, I could never return to my native planet."

"Do you *want* to return?" Beth asked. "Your future lies here. With us."

Harris considered that. After a long moment he nodded. "Very well. Give me back the gun. I'll handle the five Darruui outside."

Coburn handed him the disruptor he had dropped. Harris grasped the butt of the weapon, smiled, and said, "I could kill some of you now, couldn't I? It would take at least a fraction of a second to stop me. I could pull the trigger once."

"You won't," Beth said.

He stared at her. "You're right."

He rode down alone in the gravshaft and made his way along the street to the place where his five countrymen waited. It was very dark now though the lambent glow of the street-light brightened the path.

The stars were out in force now, bedecking the sky. Up there somewhere was Darruu. Perhaps now was the time of the Mating of the Moons, he thought. Well, never mind; it did not matter now.

They were waiting for him. As he approached Carver said, "You took long enough. Well?"

Harris thought of the squirming ropy thoughts that nestled in the other's brain like festering living snakes. He said, "All dead. Didn't you get my signal?"

"Sure we did. But we were getting tired of standing around out here."

"Sorry," Harris said.

He was thinking, these are Servants of the Spirit, men of Darruu. Men who think of Darruu's galactic dominion only, men who hate and kill and spy.

"How many were there?" Reynolds asked.

"Five," Harris said.

Carver looked disappointed. "Only five?"

Harris shrugged. "The place was empty. At least I got five, though."

He realized he was stalling, unwilling to do the thing he had come out here to do.

A silent voice said within him, *Will you betray us again? Or will you keep faith this time?*

Carver was saying something to him. He did not hear it. Carver said again, "I asked you—were there any important documents there?"

"No," Harris said.

A cold wind swept in from the river. Harris felt a sudden chill.

He said to himself, *I will keep faith.*

He stepped back, out of the three-foot zone, and activated the subsonic generator in his hip.

"What—" Carver started to say, and fell. They all fell: Carver, Reynolds, Tompkins, McDermott, Patterson, slipped to the ground and lay in huddled heaps. Five Darruui wearing the skins of Earthmen. Five Servants of the Spirit.

He drew the disruptor.

It lay in his hand for a moment. Thoughtfully he released the safety guard and squeezed the trigger. A bolt of energy flicked out, bathing Carver. The man gave a convulsive quiver and was still.

Reynolds, Tompkins, McDermott, Patterson.

All dead.

Smiling oddly, Harris pocketed the disruptor again and started to walk away, walking uncertainly, as the nervous reaction started to swim through his body. He had killed five of his countrymen. He had come to Earth on a sacred mission and had turned worse than traitor, betraying not only Darruu but the entire future of the galaxy.

He had cast his lot with the Earthmen whose guise he wore, and with the smiling yellow-haired girl named Beth beneath whose full figure beat a Medlin heart.



*Well done*, said the voice in his mind. *We were not deceived in you after all.*

Harris began to walk back toward the Medlin headquarters, slowly, measuredly, not looking back at the five corpses behind him. The police would be perplexed when they held autopsies on those five, and discovered the Darruui bodies beneath the Terran flesh.

He looked up at the stars.

Somewhere out there was Darruu, he thought. Wrapped in its crimson mist, circled by its seven moons—

He remembered the Mating of the Moons as he had last seen it: the long-awaited mind-stunning display of beauty in the skies. He knew he would never see it again.

He could never return to Darruu now.

He would stay here, on Earth, serving a godlike race in its uncertain infancy. Perhaps he could forget that beneath the skin of Major Abner Harris lay the body and mind of Aar Khiilom.

Forget Darruu. Forget the fragrance of the jasaar trees and the radiance of the moons. Earth has trees that smell as sweet, it has a glorious pale moon that hangs high in the night sky. Put homesickness away. Forget Darruu.

It would not be easy. He looked up again at the stars as he reached the entrance to the Medlin headquarters. Earth was the name of his planet now.

Earth.

He took a last look at the speckled sky covered with stars, and for the last time wondered which of the dots of brightness was Darruu. Darruu no longer mattered now.

Smiling, Aar Khiilom turned his face away from the stars.

—Calvin M. Knox

*Australian writer N. K. Hemming makes a welcome contribution to this issue of Science Fiction Adventures—and is, to let a secret out of the bag, our first woman contributor (although she has had stories in New Worlds some years ago). However, Miss Hemming is extremely well-known in Australian science fiction circles and wrote a special play for the 1958 Melbourne Convention.*

# CALL THEM EARTHMEN

by N. K. HEMMING

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At the rate of two squadrons per single raider, there did not seem to be much chance that Earth would survive a full scale Hamadan attack. Since it had taken nearly one half of their total space force to destroy the first echelon of the Hamadan raiders and it was logical to expect that what remained would only just be sufficient to deal in kind with the second echelon, due to swing in at any time for the second phase of the attack, their final chance seemed to depend on finding the legendary Plandaro Citadel. They had no other name for it—they did not know its real one—they did not even know if the Citadel itself was real. All they had was part of an old plaque, its time-worn eroded writing at last deciphered by a man named Plandaro. It gave them a legend though—and hope. Which was what they needed most at the moment.

Kedron was old, not only in years but from a mind burdened with the knowledge that the world he had tried for so long to govern with justice and temperate control seemed destined in the end to lose its heritage of freedom.

Once he had believed in the Citadel, but now, when Earth's whole future depended on it, he could no longer hang on to

the remnants of belief. Because of that, the shock of its discovery was even more staggering . . . coming when he had given up all hope that it would ever happen.

Marshall Gardon was normally a reserved, perhaps too controlled type of man, but this time even his control was not sufficient to erase the signs of excitement and incredulity. More, it had even upset his usually precise way of speaking.

"Excellency . . . it's been found! The Citadel, I mean . . . I never really believed in it . . . I felt it couldn't possibly be real after all this time. They even sent the old woman away . . ."

Kedron smiled. In a way, Gardon's lack of control helped him get over his own shock.

"Quietly, Marshall. I agree that it is an amazing and highly unexpected discovery—but you confuse me. Where has the Citadel been found and by whom?"

Gardon snapped to attention. "Your pardon, Excellency. It was found only an hour ago, in the Jindawa hills. A farmer was digging out a new plot of ground for cultivation . . . he struck some type of metal obstruction and sent his mother in to report while he went on digging. He had uncovered what could be the wall of a building by the time Citadel investigators arrived."

"A building . . . any building?" Kedron queried softly. "It may not be the Citadel we need so much."

"The records speak of a green metal building. This wall is of green metal. I have had a transport brought here. I thought . . ."

"You thought quite right."

He was abstractedly surprised at the difference fresh hope could make. An hour ago, even five minutes ago, he had felt his age, too tired to go on any longer. Now, if not new vigour, at least new hope straightened his frail body and dispelled the apathy of almost certain defeat.

The Jindawa hills were low and rolling, meeting the spreading plains of the flats in gentle sweeps. It was, if not an actually backward district, one which clung to many outmoded ways of life. There were no mechanised farm implements, only the ancient horse and the hand implements that were little different from those used in the new beginning so many centuries ago.

The hills were green and sleepy—but one of them flashed

with life of its own. Around the strange, shining anachronism of it, machines buzzed and clawed at the ground. Men swarmed around the machines, their voices in excited contrast to the placid, unmoved hum of the mechanical things that tore away the disguise of centuries, with no understanding of what they were doing and what it could mean to Earth.

Kedron stood on the flat deck of the transport and watched the tight, packed dirt slowly give up the secret it had guarded for uncounted ages, watched the metal gleam bright and untarnished in the slanting rays of the sun.

"Have you any idea yet what metal it is?"

Gardon shrugged. "We haven't tried to make any tests yet, Excellency."

"And probably when we do, they will tell us very little."

The speaker was a young man wearing the uniform of the Citadel Committee. "The ancients were very much ahead of us." A sudden spasm twisted his features. "Damn the filthy aliens who destroyed them!" he muttered abruptly.

Kedron turned his head. He had a vague memory of seeing the younger man before, only abstract and fleeting, until the neat uniform reminded him. Of course Naron Bardin would be here, not only as chairman of the Citadel Committee but because this could be the culmination of his life's work. He, perhaps more than anybody, would be aware of the deep significance of this moment.

"You feel deeply on the subject of the aliens," Kedron said slowly.

"I think anyone who had studied the past as much as I have would feel deeply, Excellency." Naron's voice was formal, but his eyes were on the green gleam from the hill and he bent suddenly to pick up a handful of rich, dark soil. "This soil . . . it's fresh and good—but they made it so radioactive that at one time it was incapable of growing anything—and above all, they destroyed a great civilisation."

Kedron watched him crumble the rich soil between his fingers, not harshly but almost protectively and it was so characteristic of the whole race that it gave him a sudden feeling of unity with what Naron felt. He could experience the sharp pang of loss, could visualise with the younger man the death of a great and ancient civilisation. Even though, in its dying agonies, that civilisation had managed to somehow destroy its murderers, he still hated them, the killers who had



once spread fire and terror and death across the face of this green and beautiful world. Yet his hatred of the alien race that had died to its very last member was nothing compared to what he felt when he imagined the clawed feet of the Hamadam treading the soft, green grass and lifting ugly snouts to breathe the fresh, sweet air.

This planet Earth, it belonged to man. It belonged to *them*. They were one and part of it. Together they had evolved from molten fury, up the long, dim paths of evolution and antiquity. Man and Earth, they belonged to each other.

He could not help smiling to himself, but although the thought was overfanciful, it expressed so aptly the deep affection and loyalty that every man and woman felt towards this planet that had bred them.

A sudden shout interrupted his flowing thoughts. The men and machines were all clustering around one side of the hill.

"I think they have found a door," Naron said quickly.

The green gleam was unbroken by any black line that could have denoted the presence of a door; there was no sign at all, except for the simplicity of a square of engraving on the surface of the otherwise blank surface of the wall.

"A door?" Kedron queried.

Naron did not answer for a moment, then he turned apologetically. "Your pardon, Excellency. I was . . . reading." He paused, unable to control the exultant triumph of his smile. "I can assure you, however, that this *is* the Citadel." His fingers lightly touched the finely etched words on the green surface. "Erected originally by a wealthy eccentric of the previous civilisation in the year 1992 of their time—as far as we are able to judge—a storehouse of knowledge for a thousand years, until the civilisation was destroyed by the aliens."

"Five thousand years," Kedron said softly. "Five thousand years it has been waiting—and it has been found at this time, when we need it so much."

The same impulse that had prompted Naron to pick up a handful of the rich soil made him bend and do the same and it was good to know that perhaps there was hope again, that perhaps Earth and man would go on together, as they had for so long in the past and had seemed destined to do in the future—until the threat of the Hamadan came upon them.

It took them a week to find the real door of the building. The inscription was only a plaque, commemorating the laying of the foundation stone by one Charles Jackson. Two days later they found the actual opening mechanism for the door.

Kedron was there, as he had been for the whole time, dignity to the winds and his high position forgotten. Nobody seemed to expect anything else of him at the moment.

Naron's fingers were trembling as he inserted them into the grooves on the door's smooth surface and pressed down sharply. Even Gardon trembled as a great sheet of green wall slid aside, soundless and smooth even after five thousand years of inactivity.

As the door came to rest, fully open, lights sprang on automatically. It was obviously an entrance chamber ; small, square and almost bare save for the outline of another door and a somewhat larger engraved plate.

Naron frowned as he read it. "There is . . . it's somewhat different to what I expected," he said hesitantly after a moment.

"Since you are the only one able to read it, perhaps you will explain," Gardon retorted, his usual excitement making him a little snappish.

"I believed from the old records that it was simply the material of its construction that might have enabled the Citadel to survive to our time," Naron explained. "I never thought for one moment that they had made deliberate efforts to preserve their knowledge for a civilisation after their own." He broke off and made a quick gesture of apology. "I am perhaps confusing you. As I said earlier, it was started originally by a wealthy eccentric, as a monument to man's achievement. Shortly after his death it became a national trust and then, with the coming of world government, a racial trust. Each year records of further knowledge gained were added. About seven hundred years after its inception the original stone of its construction was sprayed with some substance which once it hardened proved practically indestructible. I believe this was done not so much with the object of making the building impenetrable, but to preserve the actual structure from ravages by climatic conditions.

"When war broke out the front door was simply closed and its unique outer skin saved it from the total destruction that obliterated everything else around it. They had not built it with the intention of constructing some sort of citadel of

knowledge to survive any atomic holocaust—they had advanced far beyond war among themselves—but more as a museum. We found mention of it in old records we were able to translate and hoped that the materials used to preserve it would have enabled it to survive even the Age of Destruction and still be intact somewhere to this day.”

Kedron listened patiently to the recital of what they all knew, then he added gently, to bring the scientist to the point :  
“ And now ?”

“ Now it is quite obvious that in the later stages they actually meant it to survive and carried out certain alterations to ensure that nobody could get any further than this entrance unless they themselves chose to allow them through.” He pointed to the plaque. “ I’ll read it out.”

‘ The room beyond this door contains certain machines that must not be tampered with or operation attempted until their use is understood. Simple and clear directions are engraved on the control panel, but unless you can read this language you will not be able to understand them. Therefore you will not be able to proceed any further than this entrance chamber until you can read the language, since the directions for operating this door are engraved below. There is no other way to open it unless you can read and follow these directions carefully.’ Naron finished reading and turned to face them with a rather dry smile.

“ I think we can accept their word for that particular fact,” he said. “ We won’t get inside unless we can read the directions.” He paused and nodded towards a small machine and a pile of books made of thin metal foil beneath the plaque. “ That’s probably the means they left behind to ensure that the language could be learned eventually.”

“ Well, can you read the directions ?” Gardon asked.

“ Of course.” He turned and proceeded to open the door.

It slid back with ponderous slowness this time, as if it was reluctant to disclose whatever secrets its ancient builders had at the last moment decided to protect from intrusion, gleaming with the familiar green brilliance under the overhead lights. They moved towards it eagerly and then, on the threshold. . . they halted.

Machines purred softly and, in the centre of them, a man slept beneath a glass dome.

“ Is it a statue ?” Kedron asked, but Naron shook his head.

"I shouldn't think so, Excellency. They would not have gone to the trouble of coating those inner walls with the green material, so that nobody could break through, nor installed machines capable of running for five thousand years if they were concerned with merely preserving a statue." He walked over to the domed couch where the man rested and added with almost unnatural calm. "I should say he is in some form of suspended animation."

Gardon immediately looked sceptical, but Kedron did not say anything, merely stood there with a waiting expression on his old, lined face, because he had noticed something that seemed to have passed them by, or if they had seen it, something that caused them no comment as yet.

Naron bent to read the inscriptions on the side of the couch. When he straightened up he nodded.

"Yes, it's quite true. The possibility, of course, is that some automatic cut-out was installed to bring him out of it long ago, but failed to operate for some reason and this manual one is only for such an emergency as that."

"If he hasn't been here too long . . ." Gardon looked down at the still, brown face, as lifeless as the cold stone of a statue would have been. "He doesn't look as if it would be possible for him to ever move again."

"Stop talking about whether or not he can live again," Kedron said with sudden crispness in his voice. "Look at him—really look at him. The shape of his ears, skin colouring . . . little intangible differences in his features."

They looked down as he told them and the shock was more because they had noticed it before and disregarded it, than because of the difference itself.

"He's not . . ." Gardon began incredulously.

"Precisely. He is not an Earthman." Kedron looked down at the sleeper again and his features were set and grim. "From our knowledge of the time he comes from we can only conclude that he is a member of the alien race that destroyed our previous civilisation—in which event we certainly shall not revive him."

"Make sure then that he stays dead," Gardon said. He looked down through the dome. "So that's what they looked like." He frowned and looked up after a moment. "I wonder what he's doing in this building."

"He could probably tell us if we revived him," Naron pointed out softly.



"No!" He was aware of something rippling coldly up his spine and tried to shrug it off, but it persisted. "It's strange," he said after a while, "but I have a premonition of disaster. His race died and I think we should let this last member of it stay dead. Naron and his staff can read the writing easily enough. We do not need the alien to translate for us."

"I am afraid we do need him," Naron corrected quietly. He waved a hand towards the faint outline of another door at the far end of the room, beyond the machines. "That door leads into the main section of the building—the section we need to reach to obtain the knowledge and weapons to keep Earth free from the Hamadan."

"Well?" Gardon insisted. "You've opened two doors already . . ."

"But I couldn't open this one, Marshall." He looked down at the inscription again, then across at the gleaming green wall that cut off the end of the chamber. "There are no instructions. The alien carries them in his head. Only he can open the door for us." He waved a hand around expressively. "It's quite obvious, isn't it? They did not mean anybody to gain access to the rest of the building unless the alien approved. This chamber is entirely enclosed in the green material. We cannot break through from here. The outside is the same. The only way in is through that door."

"But why put the only means of access into an alien's hands?"

Naron looked over at Gardon and shook his head. "We've taken it for granted for a good many years that this . . . this citadel belongs to the Earthmen . . ."

"So it does."

"Originally perhaps, Marshall Gardon. But look at the conversion that was carried out. And suppose it was not the Earthmen who did it?"

"You are suggesting that in the later stages of the war it came into the hands of the aliens, who converted it to their own use?" Kedron asked and when Naron nodded, he added deliberately, "Then we shall revive him and he shall be forced to take us through into the main section of the building. I find it quite appropriate that the remaining member of the race that destroyed our previous civilisation should wipe out that debt by saving our present one from the Hamadan."

The alien would resist of course, but with the knowledge of what had been done in the past, they would not be too scrupu-

lous. The door was there and it would be opened, whatever they had to do to the alien.

Naron stood back, glancing over at the casket. "If I understand the directions correctly, the machines are now set to reverse the process that made him as he is now."

With a quick twist of one hand, he pulled down the main switch.

The place was crowded with the number of people who had pressed their way inside. There would be no room for the alien to make trouble, even if he did revive.

"Any reaction?" Kedron asked.

Naron shook his head. "Nothing that I can detect, except for a faint glow on those copper plates at each end of the casket. Perhaps . . ."

He stopped—because an almost imperceptible softening was bringing life to the alien's stone hard features. Somebody gasped, but apart from that sound there was no noise except for the gentle purr of one of the machines in the background.

The softening deepened, became more pronounced. The features lost their look of carved stone. A hand twitched and somebody gasped again—then with startling suddenness, the alien opened his eyes and looked at them.

For a brief moment his face had a puzzled frown, as if he was trying to focus returning vision, then his features abruptly convulsed in the deepest hatred they had ever seen. If they had a legend of hatred for what his race had done in the past, then he hated them as well. It was in the sudden, bitter fury of the unfamiliar blue eyes, the loathing of the short remark in some incomprehensible language that reached them through a hidden microphone somewhere in the casket.

"Watch him carefully," Kedron ordered sharply, as the alien moved his hand to a switch inside the casket.

The transparent dome slid away. There was a soft, slithering sound from the tunic of some metallic fibre the alien wore and he sat up and watched them. The hatred was controlled now; his expression was more grim thoughtfulness, as if he was considering some action that had been decided upon before he had been put into the long sleep. Finally, he stood up and his face was almost as expressionless as it had been when they first saw him.

"He's decided to wait," Kedron said. "He wants to know the position before he decides on anything."

"He will find the decisions are in our hands." Gardon looked at the alien grimly and ordered some of his men to surround him, so that he could not touch anything on the casket. The soldier pointed to a second lever inside the casket, visible now that the alien had stood up. "See that switch? That was possibly the decision he had to make."

Kedron gave him a quick glance. "You mean it could destroy the Citadel?"

"Possibly." Gardon looked at the tiny red lever again. "They may have anticipated such an eventually as their enemy winning. I think we can presume that switch was put there so that he could destroy the Citadel immediately on awakening, if he thought it necessary."

Kedron nodded. "That was his first impulse." He watched the impassive face of the alien. "Then he decided to wait. He wants to find out if any more of his kind are alive. He will try to contact them, so that they can use the Citadel for their own purposes." He shrugged, with dry, grim humour. "You might as well try to get that inner door open. I don't think you will do any good on your own though. Meantime, bring the alien to the capital and teach him our language. We can't do anything until we can understand each other."

The alien picked up their language quickly. It seemed as if he may have had some grounding on which to base his learning of it.

"He also seems to be able to understand the written language of the old civilisation," Naron added.

Kedron shrugged. "I suppose they knew each others language. They had been fighting long enough."

"That's one thing that has always puzzled me." Naron looked thoughtfully at the transcript of an old record. "The lack of resemblance between the old written language and our present day one. Though I suppose it's understandable enough," he added. "We had to make a completely new start."

"How is he taking his captivity?"

Naron frowned. "That's another thing that has me puzzled. He has picked up a bit of our history—that's natural enough—but for some reason it seems to be causing him a type of grim amusement. He will not say why though. When I asked him once, he said he would wait until he could speak to us properly."

"Meantime, I suppose we have to wait until then to get into the Citadel—and it's time we can't afford to waste." He drummed his fingers impatiently on the table, but his frown was worried. "I've just heard from Gardon that the second echelon of Hamadan raiders have left their position and swung in."

"How long do we have?"

"About a month before they strike. We can take care of them, of course, but . . ."

He broke off. They would probably just about manage to buy this short respite by sacrificing the rest of their fleet, but it was a respite that would end hopelessly, with complete finality, when the main Hamadan fleet arrived, unless something in the Citadel could save them. They could do a lot in a year.

If they could get into the Citadel.

The alien was still wearing his metallic tunic when he was brought into the room. It shimmered dully as he looked round at them; at Gardon sitting on Kedron's right, grim and alert; at Naron who was watching him with something like unease, at the guards ranged around the walls. Finally he looked back at Kedron, with something humorous and bitter in his eyes. If it was some secret joke, it was one that did not seem to be causing him any real amusement. The same ironic amusement that had been in his expression when they tried earlier to make him tell them about the opening device for the Citadel and he had refused to speak, other than as necessary to learn the language, until he was ready. They had not yet tried force to make him speak because, luckily, there was a machine, taken from the underground caverns of the previous civilisation, that eased language difficulties and made understanding possible in three or four days.

Now that understanding was possible if he still refused to tell them, they would have to use force. Knowing the past, they would not be too particular what methods they used.

"Sit down," Kedron instructed and the alien sat down, facing them across a gap of five thousand years, with the same mocking bitterness and amusement in his expression.

"You know who I am?"

The alien nodded. "Kedron, dictator of Earth."

He spoke with a heavy accent, but the words were understandable enough.



Kedron shook his head. "Not dictator. I am merely the leader of a council chosen in free election to represent the wishes of the people." He made an impatient gesture of one hand. "But you were not brought here to discuss politics. You know what we want, don't you?"

The alien nodded again. "You want what's inside the Citadel." He looked at them with the bitter amusement deepening. "Why should I give it to you though?"

Gardon shrugged. "We expected that attitude, of course. You leave us with no choice then but to persuade you to change your mind."

The alien laughed shortly. "Yes . . . you always were rather good at methods of persuasion."

Naron, on the other side of him, flushed angrily. "I find that somewhat out of place, considering what your race did to Earth and our previous civilisation."

"Oh yes . . . the previous civilisation." He leaned back in the chair almost insolently. "I've been out of circulation for around five thousand years. Suppose you bring me up to date."

Naron was about to speak again, but Kedron silenced him with a swiftly upheld hand.

"You probably know much more about pre-destruction history than we do, alien. However, I will tell you as much as we have been able to find out." He paused, drumming his fingers on the table, as he always did when he was worried or unsure of himself. There was no reason to cause it this time, unless it was a return of the strange premonition of disaster he had felt when he first saw this man, even before they had awakened him. "The civilisation of predestruction days was, of course, far more advanced than we are. They had even colonised the nearby stars, which we are nowhere near to doing—and might never do so now," he added, remembering the Hamadan. "Earth was attacked by another race, entirely without warning. The invaders were your race."

The alien made no comment. The only indication that he had even heard was a deepening of the sardonic, bitter amusement on his face.

"This race had apparently lost its own world in some manner we have not yet been able to discover. They were looking for somewhere else to settle and they chose Earth. It was unfortunate for that planet that it already had an

indigenous race. The aliens were ruthless. They decided there was not room enough for both of them. They located the colonies first, those on the near stars and those in the Solar system itself, then they destroyed them. They wanted no stab in the back while they were dealing with the mother world. The colonies had no chance to send any warning, then the aliens swung in on Earth. They were just as ruthless and just as victorious, at first. Our people managed to develop new weapons and push them back. The war then developed into a stalemate. Nearly everything above ground had been destroyed, people were living underground in specially designed shelters. The aliens had landed and were doing the same thing in the territory captured by them.

"There were no prisoners. Both sides seemed prepared to die rather than remain in captivity. Perhaps because they feared they might be forced to divulge valuable information? Finally some new weapon was developed and used by our people. It destroyed the aliens, but it had an unfortunate backlash on the people who used it . . . wiping their memory banks completely clean, like a sponge, erasing everything. In one moment, while the aliens were destroyed, they became the most primitive savages the world had ever known since the race first evolved. As savages they were frightened of the shelters. They smashed everything they could see, in unthinking terror, then they found their way above ground again."

"It has taken five thousand years for civilisation to come back," Gardon said grimly, as the old leader paused. "Our only knowledge of the past comes from records we have been able to find and it took us hundreds of years to understand the language they were written in. Five hundred years ago we first found mention of the Citadel. We've been looking for it ever since. Fragmentary remains of the old civilisation, found in the shelters, have enabled us to fight the Hamadan so far—but we know the sort of thing that is in the Citadel and we need it so desperately that we won't be too scrupulous what means we use to get it, because we've found out something of what your race did to us in the past."

"Marshall Gardon puts the matter rather strongly," Kedron said in his quiet voice. "But he nevertheless expresses what we all feel. We have no explanation yet as to why your alien race should have taken possession of our own peoples' Citadel and your being put into suspended animation there—possibly

in the hope of utilising it somehow if your race did lose the war—but whatever it was, your race is dead now. There can be no hope of your being able to contact survivors of them and using the knowledge of the Citadel to overthrow us. You are the last of them.”

“Yes, they told me that,” the alien said softly. “But you’ve got one very important fact wrong. Oh, everything else is near enough correct, but . . .” He paused and the bitter amusement deepened. “I’m not the alien. You are.”

Kedron felt something sickening wrench at his mind. So this was the truth. It was no use to try to deny it. There was something too deep and instinctive that accepted it. This was the reason for the sense of foreboding he had felt and now all the accepted past was dissolving as the ugly truth became plain at last.

Of course their presentday written language bore no resemblance to the ancient one. It never had. It had not even belonged to the same race. They were the aliens who had swept in from the darks of space, destroying everything that stood between them and what they wanted, destroying with the ruthless cruelty that must have so characterised them in the past.

But we’ve changed, he thought desperately. We are not like that now. He still felt the hatred for the race that had caused so much destruction, but it was different now. It was an inner hatred, because he accepted, without question, that the Earthman spoke the truth.

“Tell us,” he said dully. “What really happened?”

“You’ve got most of it right,” the Earthman said again, bitingly. “The aliens were hard and ruthless. They had evacuated their home world just before its sun turned nova—and shall I tell you why there were not any prisoners?” he added with a derisive humourless grin. “The aliens liked to torture people. They had a strong streak of sadism in their nature. It wasn’t just the fact of death that pleased them . . . they liked to watch people in great pain, liked to watch them squirm and die slowly . . . so we did them out of that pleasure.” A brown hand touched his throat. “Everyone had a device embedded surgically in the throat. They could destroy themselves at a second’s notice, whenever they wished, so don’t try torturing information out of me, aliens. I’ve got that device too. I’ve also got a second one.” The brown

hand touched another part of his throat and the derisive, humourless smile grew more pronounced. "To destroy the Citadel by remote control. They can be operated simultaneously, or separately, by a certain sequence of words. They will also operate if any attempt is made to remove them, unless by certain methods that only I know."

"Your . . . people were very thorough," Naron said, as if he was struggling with acceptance of what he had learned.

"We learned to be," the Earthman said grimly. "And the aliens didn't get any mercy from us either although we didn't sink to their level and torture for the pleasure of it. The feeling against them was so bitter they were mostly shot on sight. We never kept prisoners."

There was a little silence, then Kedron nodded as if he understood the impossibility of allowing prisoners to live, knowing how their own race would be treated if they allowed themselves to live after captivity.

"Go on," he said quietly.

The Earthman shrugged. "The aliens weren't much more advanced than we were and the war quickly became the stalemate you mentioned. It was more a question of espionage and counter-espionage systems being too good. The moment one side developed a new weapon, the enemy knew of it. Then we found something entirely new, entirely different . . ."

He broke off and the past was real again . . . a past where such a terrible mistake had been made.

The shelters were only dimly lighted. The generators needed extensive repairs, but there was no time to spend on them. The weapon was almost finished, as well as the insulators to guard the people in the shelters.

Grant Bendal was a scientist who had worked on the weapon. He perhaps more than anyone realised its awful potentiality. He also knew a little about the insulators and wasn't satisfied with them.

"I'm afraid you're relying on too many uncertainties, General." He pushed the papers away from him and stood up. "I've checked Johnson's equations time and again and he's taking chances."

"We've had this out before, Bendal. You're in charge of the weapon. The insulators are Johnson's work. He knows far more about them than you do."

"Perhaps he does—but I still know enough about the way

the insulators work to tell you he's taking too many risks. There will be a back-lash that could wipe our brains clean, too heavy for the insulators to handle. At least test the thing before you put it into full scale use."

"We can't and you know it. The aliens are building the same sort of weapon and we're only a little ahead of them. We know for a fact that they already have insulators installed."

"At least they're a more practical type of insulator. We should have used that sort ourselves," Bendal grunted.

"We would have done so if our agents had brought back plans of them before Johnson had started on his own insulators. There's no time to convert them now and we can't waste time testing the weapon on the insulators. That central crystal takes months to grow and all our resources. If we use it up on a test, the aliens could destroy us before we can grow another."

"I still don't like it. It's one thing to burn out the aliens' brains, but it doesn't do much good if it leaves us mindless savages, with no knowledge of who we are or what we've been." He waved a hand around the compact room that was the focal point of Earth's whole defence now. "You know what they'd do—destroy everything around them. The shock would probably send them temporarily mad, as well as wipe their memories clean. Their reason would come back, but not their memories. All you would have left is a pack of savages as primitive as any bushman, more so."

"We haven't time to convert the insulators, Bendal. There just isn't anything we can do. We'll have to take our chance. At least savages can rebuild, even if they have to start from scratch. If we wait, the aliens will get in first and there will be no chance at all of rebuilding."

"Wait a moment!" Bendal's eyes narrowed suddenly. "If that does happen, we might be able to cut down the waiting period, give civilisation a quick start again."

"Go on."

"The Jackson Museum. It survived the bombing that flattened the city around it. It's a storehouse of knowledge all ready for us. All we need do is fly in the up-to-date stuff—weapons included—in case any aliens survive, put in a guardian and shut the doors."

The general looked sceptical but interested. "How long do you propose that this guardian should stay in the museum?"

"A hundred years, maybe a little more, until they've got



over the madness stage and settled down into tribal societies. It will be easier to work with them when they are ready to start again."

"You forget one thing, Bendal—no human being is going to live for a hundred years or so. Even if he does, do you think a doddering ancient is going to be able to do much good?"

"There is a way." Bendal hesitated. "Will you leave it to me?"

"All right. The whole thing is in your hands—so long as the weapon is finished in time."

It had been finished, of course, and so had the Citadel. At the last moment Earth's military leaders had taken an interest in the project and produced a hoarded can of the precious, green-gleaming izmira. Unfortunately for the defence of Earth, right up to about a year before the alien invasion, izmira was not far beyond the laboratory stage. The quantity of the material produced originally to coat the outer walls of the Citadel had taken years of work and its price had been completely prohibitive. A year before the alien invasion they had at last found a method to produce it quickly and cheaply. The first mass production factory was built, the first test batch produced—and the aliens had bombed the factory.

It had been the first intimation of their presence and a completely lucky shot that they should have destroyed the one factory that could have given Earth an impenetrable defence. After that, of course, there was no time to build or convert other factories to produce it. Only the test batch had survived and later turned up in the shelters—too small a quantity to coat the underground caverns, but put by in case it was needed for some 'last-ditch' stand. It was used in the final stage of the Earth-alien war to coat the inner walls that led to the main sections of the Citadel, where the actual formula for the cheap and quick production of izmira itself now also rested for use in the future.

He looked at them and they were silent as he finished speaking. The bitterness and the helpless fury were not hidden now. He let them see how much he hated them, a legacy carried fresh from the past when their races had fought each other. It was not dimmed by the five millennia that had passed, because to him no time had elapsed. He remembered

the old civilisation being destroyed, he had lived with its destruction and now he faced the race that had wiped them out, knowing that in his loss and bitterness, he still had the final weapon.

"Well, there you have it. You're not descended from the old civilisation." His lips twisted, denying them the heritage they claimed. "You're not Earthmen and you never can be. You're the race that destroyed them, the aliens you condemn so bitterly . . ."

"But how could . . ." Kedron began dully. "I mean, it was the Earthmen who were ahead with the final weapon."

"The answer's obvious, isn't it?" Bendal laughed with the same derisive, humourless amusement. "We only thought we were ahead with the weapon. Your people got in first. We were destroyed. You only received the backlash, which apparently even you're own insulators couldn't handle—but don't think you're going to get the Citadel. Now I know the full story of what happened, I shall destroy it when I've watched you squirm enough—or maybe I'll hand it over to your own enemies. How about that?"

Kedron winced as he met the derisive amusement, but Naron leaned forward pleadingly.

"Grant Bendal, that is the past. Help us. We are all men—and we need the Citadel. Without it Earth will fall to the Hamadan. Surely even you would not allow that to happen?"

"Wouldn't I? I can't do anything to bring back my own people but at least I can watch the retribution that's been stalking you for five thousand years. I don't know a thing about the Hamadan but I'd rather they had Earth and the Citadel than you." He rose to his feet and stood looking down at them, his face set and hard with decision. "So I'm going to sit by and be the cheer squad for all the Earthmen you killed—while the Hamadan wipe you out as completely as you destroyed us."

The apathy of defeat and helplessness was back. The second echelon was nearing Earth. Within a week they would engage the tiny space force remaining to the defenders and then Earth would be completely unprotected when the main Hamadan fleet arrived.

Once the future had seemed assured, when they found the Citadel, now it was even more bleak, knowing that what was inside could possibly save them, but was more out of reach

than if it had never been found. Then they could have gone on hoping.

Gardon came in, his face gloomy. "No luck," he said and flopped down into a chair with morose despair. "I've tried just about everything and he just laughs at us. Threats are useless and when I told him he could have whatever he wished, he said he was already getting it," he finished gloomily.

Kedron nodded. "I know. Anticipation of our destruction which will culminate in actual reality when the main Hamadan fleet arrives." He rose heavily to his feet. "We have approximately a year and we could do so much during that time."

A buzz from the desk set interrupted them. Kedron leaned forward to switch on.

"What is it?"

"The Earthman wishes to visit the shelters, Excellency."

"The shelters!" He exchanged a glance with Gardon, then shrugged. "Very well, take him there."

When he had switched off, Gardon rose to his feet. "I suppose there's no chance of using the shelters ourselves to hold out against the Hamadan attack?"

"To what end? We can't fight them. They will just land and take over. If they are as bad as we apparently once were, they might simply exterminate us from above." He turned away, drumming his fingers on the desk again. "Gardon—how could we have been like that? We're not now. It . . . doesn't seem possible, that we could have acted as ruthlessly as the records say."

Gardon's face twisted. "It's not a pleasant past to have to admit, but I'm afraid it is ours all right, Excellency. It is being confirmed every day now. We're reading the past differently—and everything now points to the Earth people being the race that died and ours being the alien one that destroyed them. We can't escape it. We haven't any right to this planet we're so eager to defend."

No more right than the Hamadan. A heritage they prized and treasured and were quite prepared to die for—and it was stolen. Another race had trod the long, dim path of evolution with this world; another race belonged to Earth. Not the present one. They were the usurpers.

What had their original name been? Where had they come from? It did not seem to matter. They were as much a part of Earth now as if they *had* evolved there.

Bendal walked slowly up the mound of grass grown rubble. Behind him, at the foot of the hill, the transport that had brought him waited until he wished to return. They had placed no guards on him, merely left him to go alone on whatever quest had brought him here.

He reached the top of the mound and went down the other side, along a little way, until rocky ground began to rise, and there he found the entrance to the shelter, gaping and unshielded. The steps were mossy and cracked, but he went down them and when it became too dark to see any further, he switched on the torch they had given him.

As he shone the torch around there was a sharp rush of nostalgia and loss. The walls were old and time worn, but he remembered them. It was down here he had come five thousand years ago, walking beside General Robert Bramwell for the last time. They had left him at the Citadel and gone back to the weapon they had not had time to use and the insulators that had not saved them.

He shone the torch upwards, searching with practised memory for where he knew one of them would be and he found it, set high and flush with the wall, almost undamaged. The copper of its front plate was green with age in the torchlight, then he lowered the lamp and went on.

At the first heavy steel door he stopped. It hung open on one hinge, but beyond it the tunnel was completely choked with fallen debris.

"Demolition charges," he muttered to himself.

Then he went back, borrowed tools off the crew of the transport, and returned to the tunnel to prise the insulator down off the wall. Holding the ancient, ineffectual thing that had not been able to save his race from destruction, he went out into the sunlight again.

Kedron felt the strength flow into his tired body again, but this time it was not the strength of hope. It was only anger and the bitter fury of loss that made his steps so sharp, that hardened his face when he threw open the door into the room where Bendal was working on the insulator. The Earthman's expression was not so grimly uncompromising as usual, he even looked a little uncertain, but Kedron was in no mood to notice that, with the knowledge of what was happening out in the darkness beyond Earth.

"Come with me," he ordered jerkily. "You wanted to see

the Hamadan destroy us. You might as well see the start of it."

He did not wait to see if Bendal followed him, but swung round and went out again. Behind him the Earthman rose to his feet, still holding the insulator, and followed slowly, quickening his steps as Kedron almost managed to get out of sight. When he at length entered the room where the old man had disappeared, Kedron had switched on a large screen. Hundreds of tiny spaceships filled it.

"Look at them," he said curtly. "The last of our space force. They will sell their lives at the rate of twenty ships for one raider, perhaps more. The Hamadan will have learned from their first attack on us. It may take thirty ships now to get one of theirs."

"The death or glory squad?" Bendal queried, but there was again that strange note of uncertainty behind his jibing.

"They will get both!" Kedron snapped. "We didn't ask them to do this. They volunteered, every one of them, so that Earth herself should be untouched, so that our factories and workshops should be preserved, in case we find something new that will enable us to build again, to hold off the main Hamadan fleet when it arrives."

Bendal did not say anything. He merely watched the fleet of tiny ships gliding imperceptibly towards destruction, then he took a screwdriver out of his pocket and carefully tightened something on the insulator.

Kedron abruptly clicked over a switch and a man in a dark blue uniform appeared.

"Commander Lanton, Excellency. We're just picking up the first signs of them on our detectors."

"Good luck, Commander," Kedron said quietly and flicked over another switch. This time the man in the picture was younger. He had the youthful, eager look of all men who go out to die for an ideal. Again and again, Kedron flicked the switches and the buttons and again the men appeared, smiling and unafraid, ready to die for Earth.

"Well, Bendal," he said bitterly. "Aren't you going to cheer? It will be starting soon."

Bendal looked up at the screen. It was back again to the first view he had seen, the little ships in their brave, vain march to destruction. He laid the insulator carefully on the floor.

"I've been checking this thing," he remarked abruptly. "It was used."



Kedron shrugged impatiently and did not take his eyes off the screen. "If a weapon was used, the insulators would naturally be switched on, even if useless."

"I meant that our own weapon had been used. The insulator . . ."

He broke off, because he realised that Kedron was not even listening to him. The fleet of tiny ships had met others, giant black monsters that showed up like spectres of death against the starbright background. The little ships split up, diving off in neat, precise formations and each formation took one of the black, Hamadan raiders.

It was sheer suicide, but it was glorious suicide. One after the other, they destroyed their black quarry, until Kedron's fingers played over the switches again and Bental saw those same young men, their faces strained but determined, fingers clenched around firing pins of weapons. He heard the things they said and something made him wince instead of cheer. The men he watched had copper skins and pointed, faun-like ears, but they could have been any young men of Earth defending the homeland they loved. They could have been any of the men who had died five thousand years ago.

"Stop it !" he demanded abruptly. "Call them back."

"I couldn't. They wouldn't come back, even if they could. They know they are buying time for something else to be found." He flicked the switches again and the little ships were still diving. They were fewer, but so were the black ships. Sometimes part of a formation would survive and it immediately split up and attached itself to other formations. "Well, Earthman ?" he queried bitterly. "No cheer squad ? You surprise me." His fingers played over the switches again. Sometimes the screen lit up, many times it remained dark. "You're getting what you want. You're seeing us destroyed."

After a long blank, while his questing fingers found no answer, the screen lit up for a short moment. A young, fair-haired man crouched over the controls of one of the tiny rockets. In miniature they could even see the screen in front of him and the black ship in the gun sights.

"Damn you for the filthy reptiles that you are !" he was yelling. "You won't get her. Earth belongs to man !"

Abruptly he was gone, selling his life for Earth. The screen remained dark for a moment, then the tiny ships were back. There were not many of them now, but there was only one

black ship left. All of them grouped and dived, wheeled away and came back again. Something exploded and glowed redly at the rear of the raider and instantly one of the tiny ships detached itself from the formation, executed a seemingly impossible manoeuvre that brought it behind the black raider—then dived straight into the heart of the glowing red patch. The holocaust was immediate and complete.

Fifteen tiny ships, all that was left of those that had set out, turned and limped for home.

"The Hamadan are not exceptionally advanced," Bendal said gruffly. "You could beat them even with those fifteen ships."

Kedron laughed bitterly. "How?"

"Coat them with izmira and instal supra-nuclear weapons."

"There is no need to taunt us—although I suppose it is only to be expected."

Bendal watched him turn away wearily. Abruptly he bent to pick up the insulator.

"You weren't listening to me a little while ago. I said that our weapon was used. I can tell from the insulator. It was set to handle backlash, not an outright attack."

Kedron shrugged, without turning. He was still watching the screen, almost empty now, when only a short time ago it had contained so many of the tiny ships.

"You did not destroy us."

He swung round, his face blank with shock. "I don't . . ." he was beginning, but Bendal cut him short.

"I don't understand properly myself." The Earthman looked down at the insulator he held. "I had them take me over to the other shelters—and the insulators weren't even on there. They were finished and installed, but they were not switched on. The aliens were not using their weapon. It was ours that must have done all the damage." He flung the insulator violently on the floor. "I never trusted that thing. Johnson was a brilliant and imaginative man, but he wasn't thorough and there weren't enough of us for double checking." He kicked the insulator where it lay on the floor. "That's what killed us."

Kedron looked down at the insulator, at the patina of age on its copper skin. It looked innocent enough, not something that could have killed a race.

"It was supposed to attract the backlash, but it seems to



have attracted the actual force itself and, instead of absorbing it, radiated it out again. The insulators were installed all over the shelters, to protect us." His lips twisted on the words. "They protected us all right. You got the backlash. We were handed the rest on a platter, all nicely lined up in front of our insulators."

"Couldn't they have turned off the weapon?"

Bental shook his head. "There wouldn't have been time. One second would have been enough to make the brain lose control. Probably somebody did try to switch it off and instead he accidentally threw the main demolition switch. They had all the tunnels and shelters mined, in case of hand to hand fighting." He shrugged. "I can't be sure, of course, but . . ."

"But you are giving us the benefit of the doubt?" Kedron laughed shortly, with the same bitter humour that Bental himself had once used. "That is generous of you, but it doesn't seem to alter the position much. We are still enemies."

"Yes. And we always will be. It will never be any different—but I can't help remembering what he said."

The Earthman looked at the screen, at the tiny rockets limping home, and a voice rang in his mind.

"Earth belongs to men."

The man who had said it was dead. He was an alien, but he had died in a way that earned him the name he had stolen.

Kedron looked at him with incredulous hope. "Bental . . . I can't find any more reasons to try to make you change your mind . . . even if it was possible. I couldn't use force, because of what we once did . . ." Bental remained silent, not hesitating, but not giving any answer. "Your race died, Bental—but I can promise you that we will make the name of Earth ring far through all the stars. That is the only reparation we can make. One that will come from our hearts."

The name of Earth ring far through all the stars . . .

"Get me a transport," the last Earthman said crisply. "We're going to the citadel."

In the screen the tiny rockets had grouped themselves into a wavering formation. There was something defiant and challenging about them, limping home to new hope and a new future.

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