

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

No. 12

VOLUME 2

2/



Short Novel

WHO RIDES THE TIGER

Wynne N.
Whiteford

—

Novelette

THE HALTING HAND

Kenneth Bulmer

—

Short Stories

VENUS TRAP

Robert Silverberg

THE EASY WAY

Lan Wright

—

Article



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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2 No. 12

1959

Exciting Action-Adventure Science Fiction

Short Novel :

WHO RIDES THE TIGER Wynne N. Whiteford 2

Powerful and opposing forces were out to stop Edison North representing Earth at the Galactic Federation Council on Xaron. Throughout the journey death stared over his shoulder.

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Australian writer Wynne Whiteford is still living in London and the popularity of his two former stories, "Shadow Of The Sword" (No. 6) and "Distant Drum," (No. 9) prompted us to request another galactic adventure from him. You won't be disappointed in this one, either.

WHO RIDES THE TIGER

by WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter One

The voice from the desk radio cut through the hot stillness of the room with a tense urgency. "I'm getting aboard the car now. Got all the data, but I don't think you'll like it."

Vorn leaned over the microphone. "Okay. See you in a few minutes."

He glanced across the desk. Breon shrugged his shoulders slightly, and filled a glass from the water cooler. "I never expected it to run smoothly. Too many conflicting interests involved."

Vorn walked across the room to one of the polarised windows and turned the regulator to make it completely transparent. The white ferocity of the almost vertical sunlight etched his figure in a brilliant contrast of light and shadow. From here, on the 80th floor of the towering Secretariat Building of the Galactic Federation Headquarters, he was

looking out over the mightiest of man-made achievements, the city that was the vigorous heart of an empire that sprawled over a thousand far-scattered planets. Yet his eyes held a bleak anger.

"The first time Earth has sent a representative to the Council—and they choose a man who's never been away from Earth!" His eyes flashed like steel in the reflected light from the window as he turned. "Probably the most fanatical isolationist they could find!"

The older man spread his hands. "Let's not be too quick on the trigger. Wait till Ryson gets here with his reports."

Impatiently Vorn lifted powerful binoculars from the window-shelf, his jaw thrust aggressively forward. A thousand feet below, the mile-wide strip of Meridian Plaza was almost deserted in the heat of the mid-day siesta, a valley between mountainous buildings that rose tier beyond tier, their soaring pinnacles of silver and golden metal and crystal hazy and unreal in the hot, quivering air.

Focussing the binoculars, Vorn looked southward, where the Plaza extended across a shimmering azure inlet of the sea to the vast black plain of the starport, with its lines of gleaming ships. He scanned the ships and their insect-swarms of aerial loaders, trying to pick out the one on which Ryson had just arrived, but in spite of the immense magnifying power of the glasses he could make out little detail. He was looking through ten miles of dancing, boiling air, laced with the streams of fast-flying aircars that criss-crossed over the city.

He lowered the glasses and stood with feet apart and hands on hips, until a blue aircar skimmed in to alight on the landing stage outside the window.

"He's here," he said, turning.

Breon drained his glass of water and tossed it into the disposal chute. A few seconds later he pressed the door control to allow Ryson to enter.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting." Ryson strode to the desk, tossing a brief-case in the centre of it. His face was darkly tanned beneath sun-bleached hair, and his teeth flashed in a sudden smile as Vorn handed him a drink.

Breon zipped open the brief-case and began to read through the typewritten pages of the report, Vorn leaning beside him. Ryson drank slowly, watching their eyes as they read.

"See why I said I didn't think you'd like it?"

Vorn looked up at him. "It doesn't make sense. Unless Earth's policy has changed overnight, this man North is the last person you'd have expected them to select."

Ryson shook his head. "Their policy hasn't changed. As you see from the news extracts, this fellow Edison North has been a thorn in the side of their World Government ever since the Isolationist Party got into power. He's still only in his thirties, but he's given anti-isolationist speeches and broadcasts all over the planet. He started as a news commentator—if it hadn't been for his popularity, I think the World Government would have done something to keep him quiet years ago."

Breon began reading aloud from one of the press extracts Ryson had included in his report. "Edison North, columnist, TV commentator, specialist in political analysis . . . has gained an enormous following in his bitter, relentless attacks against the Government's policy of Isolation. . . ." He raised his eyes to look at Vorn. "And this—*this* is the man they choose as Representative to the Galactic Federation Council! *Why?*"

Vorn looked across at Ryson. "When does he arrive?"

"Just before the Mid-Year Assembly. He's already on his way in an Earth ship, the *Yttria*, to Morak, 61 Cygni. That's eleven light-years from Earth. He changes there to one of the Alt-Vega liners coming directly here—about sixteen light-years."

"A direct change from ship to ship?"

"No. He'll have about thirty hours in Morak."

"Is he travelling alone?" broke in Breon.

"Yes. Space is dear on Earth ships."

Breon and Vorn exchanged glances. Vorn turned back to Ryson.

"How soon could we get to Morak?"

Ryson grinned. "I've checked that. About the time he arrives, or a few hours later."

For some seconds the hot silence of the room was broken only by the purr of fans.

"Who?" asked Vorn, looking down at Breon.

The older man looked thoughtfully at the papers for a moment, then lifted his eyes to Vorn's.

"I think it had better be you."

The swollen, deep-red disc of 61 Cygni A threw a path of light across the black water like a stream of molten iron from a furnace. The thick-set man swung the ground-car off the road between the trees, bringing it to a stop close to the edge of the cliff. The sunburnt man beside him glanced around, still holding his brief-case on his gaunt knees.

"Anybody likely to disturb us here?" he asked.

The thick-set man's dark eyes flashed in the blood-red sunlight beneath the wide brim of his hat. "I said no. When I say no, I mean it."

"Good." The sunburnt man took a photograph from his pocket and passed it over. "That's the man. His name is Edison North. About six feet tall, dark—you might describe him as athletic. He arrives on the *Yttria* tomorrow, 1600 hours. Plans to catch an Alt-Vega Starliner to Xaron about the same time the following day."

"You want me to fix it so he doesn't?"

"It's essential that he doesn't."

The thick-set man looked thoughtfully at the picture. "Who is he?"

"Terran. Representative to some trade conference."

"Trade conference? Between Earth and Xaron? What are you giving me?" The dark eyes narrowed viciously. "Say, isn't Earth sending a guy to the Galactic Council?"

The sunburnt man tensed, wiping the back of his hand across his sweating forehead. Fragments of blistered skin peeled away from it. "I don't know about that."

When the thick-set man spoke again his voice was frighteningly soft. "For a lousy thousand you want me to jump into an act like that! No game."

The sunburnt man leaned towards him. "Say ten-thousand! A thousand now, and the rest afterwards."

The sombre eyes looked calculatingly through him. "Okay."

The sunburnt man's hands trembled as he zipped open the brief-case. "There's one stipulation. I want you to use this." From the case he took a strange pistol with a slender barrel widened at the muzzle by a flare-arrester, and with rings engraved with figures about its thick breech.

"That's Xarian, isn't it? Where did you get it?"

"Never mind where I got it. I want you to use it on North, and see to it that it's left on the scene." The sunburnt man made a quick adjustment on the weapon. "This ring sets the intensity of blast; leave it on maximum. This controls the

degree of flare—leave it about here. Press your thumb here for the sighting beam—like this.” He opened a window of the car, and shone the flickering spark of the light on one of the straggling trees a hundred feet away along the cliff-edge. “Get your sighting-beam between his shoulder-blades, then squeeze the trigger.”

The blast was a streak of lightning, with the hissing crack of a giant whip. The tree spun out of sight over the cliff, leaving a blackened, smoking butt that still glowed red at the end amid a whirling shower of sparks.

“God!” breathed the thick-set man. His eyes were rivetted on the gun. He took it hesitantly as the sunburnt man handed it across to him, slowly curving his fingers around the scalloped butt. Suddenly he looked up. “Couldn’t I keep this?”

“No. It’s essential it be found near North’s body.”

“Could you get me another like it?” His eyes were again fixed hungrily on the weapon.

The sunburnt man watched him. “You’ll get it,” he said, and his lips twisted momentarily as though at some secret joke.

“Attention, all!” The voice of the *Yttria*’s public address system boomed through the narrow metal-walled corridors. “It is now 1500 hours, Morak time. We will be landing in approximately one hour at Morak Starport.”

Edison North switched off his tape-recorder and rose to his feet, stretching his arms as far as possible in the cramped six-feet-by-four cabin. When he stood on his toes, his hair almost brushed the aluminium-alloy ceiling, and he had to stand facing one corner to extend his arms diagonally across the room.

He poured a container of hot coffee from the faucet, drank with the brisk efficiency that marked all his movements, then stepped out into the thirty-inch-wide corridor, locking the sliding door behind him. He made his way towards the control-room, finding himself halted at the computer-room by one of the crew, who rose from his desk with a questioning expression.

“I’m North. Terran Representative to the Galactic Federation Assembly. I want to see Captain Regan.”

“One moment sir.” North waited as the man disappeared through the narrow door at the far end of the computer-room. In a few seconds, Regan’s lean, dark close-cropped head appeared around the door.

"This is my first voyage out of the Solar System," said North. "Could I watch you make your approach?"

Regan hesitated, his expression unreadable. Then he beckoned. "Irregular, but we don't have a Federation Representative aboard every trip. As long as no-one else hears about it—come on through."

North smiled and walked through behind Regan into the ship's control-room. He was used to getting into places which were theoretically out of bounds—a faculty he kept polished by constant practice, like all his other abilities.

"O.K.," said Regan to the other crew-member. "But no-one else. Right?"

There were only three men in the control-room, all of them tall, lank, darkly tanned, with some unseizable effect of foreignness that suggested that none of them had been born on Terrestrial soil. On these interstellar runs, the vital importance of payload kept the numerical strength of the crews, like everything else, pared to the minimum. Captain Regan introduced North to the others—Rico, the navigator and second pilot, and Carlos, the electronics engineers.

"All from Altair Five, I take it?" queried North.

"That's right." Regan's hard grey eyes looked at him piercingly, surprisingly light against his dark skin. "Thought you said you'd never been out of the Solar System."

"I haven't. But I like to keep up my general knowledge."

Rico turned from his three-dimensional charts with a short laugh. "Most Earth people don't. They think every place in the Universe is a copy of their home town."

North stood at the back of the control-room while the trio went about their careful sightings and checking of instruments. In the forward screen the two components of 61 Cygni were already widely separated, the deeper-red binary directly ahead, its sullen disc already larger in apparent diameter than the Sun seen from the Earth. The three men worked with a clean-cut, economical efficiency of movement, almost in silence. After a time Regan moved across beside North.

"You can see the planet, now: the thin red crescent right of the disc. Actually nearer the star than Mercury is to your Sun, but the star's only a tenth the Sun's brightness." He looked critically at North. "Watch out you don't sunburn while you're down there. Plenty of heat in the sun, but most of it's in the infra-red—not enough ultra-violet to give you a decent tan. One day's enough to have your skin peeling off."

"Thanks," said North. He watched the flame-rimmed black disc of the planet slowly eclipsing the blood-red sun, steadily growing in apparent size. Hard to realise that he was eleven light-years from home, almost half-way to his destination on Xaron.

"Where are you staying overnight?" asked Regan.

"Place called the Ishtar."

"I know it. Near the port. Must be eight-hundred years old—dates from the time the planet was under Terran control, before the Altair Empire had it."

"Sounds as if this place has a complicated history."

"It's a place that's gone downhill. The radioactive mine brought millions here, and when the ore ran out they couldn't afford to buy their passage anywhere else. That was five centuries ago, and now there are hundreds of millions of their descendants still trying to get away."

"Cut your throat for two credits," put in Carlos sourly.

Rico laughed. "Carlos is only sore because he lost a month's pay there one night. Someone doped him with a hypodermic pressure-spray, and he woke up two hours later behind a shed on the waterfront—cleaned out."

The crew-member from the computer-room suddenly appeared at the door. "Someone else wants to watch the landing, Chief."

"No-one else," asserted Regan. "You heard what I said."

"This is different. It's Rus Kranson."

"The Xarian?" Regan scratched his head. "O.K.," he said angrily. The crew-man disappeared.

North looked expectantly at the door. He had seen only two Xarians before, and he had often wondered whether they had been typical of the branch of the human race which was becoming increasingly dominant throughout the whole of the explored part of the Galaxy. They had both given him the uncomfortable feeling that *Homo Sapiens* was being eclipsed by one of its own variants, but he had taken refuge in the thought that they must have been highly selected individuals.

Rus Kranson did nothing to set his fears at rest. He swept into the control-room with an air of confident power that struck North and the others with an almost physical impact. It was hard to analyse exactly how the effect was produced. Kranson was a big, vigorous man, tanned, with sun-bleached blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes that had a strangely direct stare. Taken feature by feature he showed no radical departure

from the Terrestrial human norm, yet he conveyed an immediate impression of tremendous vitality.

"You three I've met." His eyes swept Regan, Rico and Carlos at a glance, then fixed intently on North. "You would be the Terran Representative to the Federation Council. Edison North, right?"

North nodded, and found his hand seized by Kranson's.

"I'm Rus Kranson. Be seeing you on Xaron. I've just spent a couple of months looking over Earth—filming everything. News interest. The fact that Earth's coming into the Galactic Federation has put it on the map again."

North felt his sense of perspectives so outraged that for once in his life he couldn't think of an adequate reply. The idea of dealing with a planet full of men like Kranson suddenly loomed in the sunny sea of his career like a menacing reef. For the first time in years, he felt unsure of himself.

With the easy swiftness of a great cat, Kranson swung round to face the door.

"Come in, Ilsa. Meet Edison North." Without asking permission of Regan he led the woman into the control-room. "My secretary," he said to North.

The woman bowed slightly, tall and slim in a shimmering blue star-like dress, her pale hair reaching her shoulders. Her huge turquoise eyes had a cool alertness.

"I've seen you on TV on Earth," she said in a low-pitched voice. "I was quite impressed by your speeches."

"Thank you."

As they turned to look at the screen, North studied her reflection in the bright metal wall of an instrument cabinet. She stood poised and relaxed, her smooth bare arms at her sides.

"Are you travelling alone?" she asked.

He felt a momentary surge of irritation at admitting that he was travelling alone—he, Earth's Representative to the Federation—when a Xarian news photographer could afford to travel with a secretary. It was such an obvious comment on the difference in economic level between the two worlds.

"Yes," he said. Still watching her reflection, he saw her exchange glances with Kranson, and a moment later the Xarian's eyes met his in the mirror-smooth metal surface. He turned, and they looked at each other directly. The Xarian's expression was unreadable.

Looking at the image of the dark planet on the screen, Edison North swallowed. For the first time in years, his mouth held the metallic taste of fear.

Chapter Two

North stepped out of the ship's airlock into a thin, head-ringing atmosphere seared by the oppressive heat of a metal-foundry. Over the angular warehouses lining the spaceport, the vast, blood-red disc of 61 Cygni B leered between flat streaks of cloud, its sullen glare turning the scene into a monochrome of crimson.

As he rode the conveyor-belt across the long gantry to the Customs House he looked down at the pavement two-hundred feet below, with its scurrying trucks and handling-machines throwing long blurred shadows. To either side were other spacecraft, some with their fins marked with the iridescent gold and turquoise insignia of Xaron, some Altairian with the white eagle of Aquila, some with the blue and orange of Arcturus IX. The *Yttria*, one of the smallest, was the only ship from Earth.

Ahead of him, Rus Kranson strode into the Customs building as though he owned it, his secretary trotting lightly at his side. She was taking no chances with the effect of Morak's atmosphere on her skin, a hood covering her head and a kind of yashmak hiding her face, her figure swathed to the ankles in a loose coat. As she turned her head, North could see only her eyes.

He found his stride long and springing—the gravity here was only seven-tenths Earth's. The people inside the Custom's House were a fantastically varied crowd, although the majority were what must have been the local type—medium height, slim, sometimes scrawny, most of them wearing a light knee-length tunic that made it hard at first for him to distinguish the men from the women. The other showed a wide range of physique, colouring and garments, obviously originating in different planetary environments.

Just inside the door he noticed a gaunt man who could easily have been an Earthman, with an angry red sunburn, the skin peeling from his forehead and nose, his eyes hidden by polaroid glasses. As North passed him he moved his hand in an apparently unconscious gesture that North thought for a moment was a kind of signal—in his many public appearances he had been used to glimpsing such a signal for some official welcoming committee, and for an instant he half-expected a band to strike up. Then he remembered where he was, and he smiled to himself as he followed Kranson and his secretary to the desks of the officials.

He stood on Kranson's left. The Xarian pushed his passport and other papers to the official, who looked briefly through them and stamped them. He seemed far less impressed with North's papers.

As he was waiting, North's attention was suddenly caught by a flickering spark of light dancing on the wall behind the desk. As he looked at it uncomprehendingly it moved down and suddenly vanished, and he realised without attaching any importance to it that it must be shining on his back.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kranson's figure explode into violent movement. He felt himself gripped by the arm and flung headlong. As he sprawled across the tessellated floor a brilliant steely light from somewhere behind him threw his shadow ahead of him, and he heard a sound like the hissing crack of a giant whip.

Turning his head as he was still sliding across the floor, he saw smoke and sparks whirling from a hole blasted in the desk where he had been standing.

Instantly, the place was an uproar of shouting voices. Everywhere, people were running.

"There!" roared Kranson, crouching as though ready to spring, his pointing finger stabbing towards a balcony or mezzanine floor running along the far side of the room.

North could see the head and shoulders of a dark, thick-set man who was running along the balcony, head lowered. Springing to his feet, he raced for the spiral metal stairway leading to the balcony, springing up two steps at a time.

Brought up on Thirtieth Century Earth, North had never been threatened with physical violence in his life. His mind had always recoiled from the very idea of it. Now, faced with it for the first time, he was amazed even as he ran to find his emotion was not fear, but savage anger. As he reached the top of the stairs, he saw the man disappearing through a doorway a hundred feet away. Something like a pistol lay on the floor, but he didn't wait to pick it up. At the instant of seeing it, he reasoned that if it were still usable the thick-set man would have held on to it.

Some instinct warned him that the best defence lay in immediate attack. The light gravity gave him an athlete's and speed in a few seconds he was at the door where the other man had vanished.

He slid the door open an inch, peered through, then flung it wide. It opened into a passageway with half a dozen doors on each side, and a downward-running stairway at the far end, spiral like the first. Near the top of the stairs two men were carrying a large cabinet down, completely blocking North's way.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Did a man run down here?"

They looked at him without answering, their eyes unexpectedly hard and sharp. When he repeated his question one of them said something in a language or dialect he didn't understand. He crowded close down to them, then, remembering the lighter gravity, vaulted over the rail of the curving stairway and sprang across to the opposite side of the spiral, half a turn lower. Swinging over the rail he ran on down. He was almost convinced the two men with the cabinet had deliberately tried to bar his way, and his spine tingled in half-anticipation of another shot or blast, but he reached the lower floor intact.

Red sunlight streamed through an open doorway like the glare from a furnace. North ran through and found himself in a parking bay with a number of lined-up ground-cars, but even as he emerged one of them was swinging out on the elevated roadway that ran shelf-like along the side of the building. There were two men in it, the driver on the left and next to him the dark, thick-set man—North could see only his head and shoulders, but he was certain it was the man who had run along the balcony.

As the car gathered speed neither occupant looked back, and two hundred yards away it veered on to a downward sloping ramp and disappeared. He had no chance of picking out the licence number or any other identifying mark—the car had been a black silhouette against the setting red disc of that grotesquely swollen sun.

North suddenly felt his limbs trembling with the reaction to the unaccustomed exertion and tension. His pulse thudded in his ears with a sound like the beating of wings. In front of him, the angular metal and glass buildings of the city rose stark and unfriendly in the ruddy light, and away beyond them harsh mountains stabbed through flat stripes of cloud to a purple sky so dark that it showed stars even in the daylight.

He felt suddenly very much alone, very far from home.

Slowly he retraced his steps. The two men on the stairway were gone, but the cabinet still rested there, leaning askew against the railing where he had last seen it. Evidently they had simply taken it from some office near the head of the stairs to block any attempt to pursue the man who had fired the gun. The fact that at least four men had been involved in the attempt to kill him brought North to an intense pitch of awareness of his surroundings.

He squeezed past the cabinet and followed the passage back to the balcony. There was a dense group of people around the spot where he had seen the pistol-like object, the most vocal among them Rus Kranson, who was arguing with a man in a black uniform. North pushed through.

"He got away," he said. "Another man had a car waiting."

The black-uniformed man turned to him, a notebook in his hand. "You the man who was fired on?" he asked.

North felt for his passport, then realised he had left it at the desk. "I'm Edison North. Terran Representative to the Galactic Federation Council. On my way to Xaron for the mid-year Assembly."

The uniformed man closed his notebook with a snap. "Have to ask you to come to Security Headquarters," he said. Looking down, North saw another man in similar uniform squatting on his haunches, carefully sliding the weapon into a plastic bag without touching it with his bare hands. When it was inside he sealed the opening of the bag and stood up.

"Okay," he said. "Let's move."

"I'll have to get my papers from the desk," protested North, "We'll come with you."

His knees still shaking slightly, North went down to the desk and recovered his passport and other papers. The official the other side of the desk looked pallid and tense, and handed the papers across with greater promptness than any other Customs official North had ever seen. A few seconds later he was in a Security Police car with one of the black-uniformed men on each side of him. Rus Kranson leaned jovially in at the window.

"If you have any trouble, call me at the Morengo Hotel," he said.

"Thanks."

The car leapt on its way with a smooth whine of electric motors, dipping down a series of long ramps until it reached an elevated roadway one level above the ground; apparently the

north-south streets here were at a level above the east-west ones, linked by clover-leaves at points of crossing.

They travelled north for two blocks, then swung down a curving ramp to a long street that ran straight into the crimson glare of the ominous sunset. The black-uniformed men said nothing until the car drew up in front of an old, plain-looking building of vitrified brownstone.

"Out," said North's right-hand neighbour. With one of the men on each side of him and a third at the rear, he was marched through the front door of the building into a brightly-lit anteroom. His guards halted, and one of them pressed a button on the wall to the right. North looked about him. The brilliant battery of lights shining down on him gave him the feeling of being on a stage. After a moment, a flat, solid-looking door slid open, and they went through into what was obviously the office of the police station.

A broad-shouldered, grey-haired man looked morosely up from behind a wide desk, and a number of others standing in the room turned to face North. All wore the black Security uniform.

"Get the spools?" the grey-haired man asked the guard on North's right.

"Yes. Here's the one covering the desk."

"Then let's see what happened."

They didn't trouble to ask North. Evidently a number of cameras in the Customs Building took a continuous record of everything that happened there, probably on erasable film or tape that was endlessly re-used unless needed for some incident such as this.

In a few seconds, North was watching the scene in the Customs Building re-created on a screen on the wall. He saw Kranson walk into the scene, then Ilsa, then himself. He saw his own figure standing at the desk, saw the flickering pin-point of light dancing down, fluttering like a moth on his back. He saw Kranson's sudden grip of his arm, throwing him headlong as the blinding flash of heat and light blasted the desk.

"That's enough," said the grey-haired man. "Where's the gun?"

The second guard carefully unwrapped the plastic bag and laid the weapon on the desk.

"Xarian, isn't it, Chief?"

The Chief looked across to another of the uniformed men, who moved closer to the desk, looked at the gun, and nodded. The Chief turned to North.

"Your papers?" He held out his hand.

North handed them over, he scanned through them, thrusting his lower lip forward, then passed them back.

"Sorry. This is a political matter. It's no concern of ours."

North started. "But— Good God, man, somebody tried to kill me!"

The Chief shrugged. "I've told you. It's no concern of ours. We don't mix with outside politics. Good night." He turned his attention to some of the papers on his desk. One of the guards took North's elbow.

"This way out," he said.

"But listen! You don't understand. Someone tried to kill me! They may try again!"

"Very likely. Better keep your eyes open."

"But—what are you going to do about it?"

"You heard what the Chief said. Sorry. Good night."

North found himself out in the street. The ruby glare of the sunset now inflamed the entire sky, giving the scene a shockingly alien aspect. The wide, black-paved street seemed to stretch all the way to the horizon, with sharp-edged buildings on each side and a few vehicles moving in the distance, jet-black silhouettes against the red.

He began to walk back the way they had brought him, covering several yards before he noticed the travelling beltway flanking the sidewalk. He stepped across its four zones until he reached the fastest, gliding forward at some twenty miles an hour.

He kept glancing about him. Somewhere in the city was someone who wanted to kill him. Someone who wanted him out of the way with sufficient urgency to try to kill him in the middle of a crowded Customs House, within minutes of his landing on the planet. Yet he knew nobody in Morak. There was no Terran Embassy here, nor as far as he knew any organisation linked in any way whatsoever with Earth. He was completely on his own.

Or perhaps not completely. There might be one man he could trust—Rus Kranson. At least, he'd pulled him out of the way of the blast. Yet Kranson was a Xarian, and it had

evidently been a Xarian weapon that had been used against him. Kranson's action might have been purely instinctive—would he necessarily prove an ally in the cold light of reason?

North found his way back to the starport, stepping off the beltway a few yards before the corner of the last street. His mouth was dry as he looked behind him for a possible pursuer.

On the corner of the broad plaza facing the port was a line of public visiphone booths, and to gain time to think out his situation without presenting a target to whoever was looking for him, he slipped inside the nearest and closed the soundproof door behind him. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

The Ishtar Hotel—Regan had said it was close to the port. North's eyes rested on a group of directories alongside the visiphone, and he began leafing through their thin plastifilm pages. He found the address of the Ishtar—corner of Draco Avenue and 283rd Street—and when he pin-pointed it on the relevant map he found it was only a few blocks away, on the avenue just behind the plaza. The Morengo, where Rus Kranson was staying, was further along on the plaza itself, facing out over the port.

He left the booth, glad of the fact that the sky was rapidly darkening, and walked towards Draco Avenue. A cold, salt breeze was whispering in from the weed-choked waters of the Ri'oro Mar. He came within sight of the Ishtar when he turned the corner—an old ferro-concrete structure with the angular massiveness of the neo-Babylonian architecture that had been in vogue many centuries ago, its main doorway guarded by two immense figures of winged bulls indirectly lit by green neon.

His heart thudding, he walked in to the reception desk, glancing around the lobby uneasily, half-expecting to see someone aiming a gun at him from behind a pillar. But there were only half a dozen people there, none of them taking any notice of him beyond a casual glance. A big, dark-skinned man behind the desk looked up at him enquiringly.

"Edison North," he said. "Just arrived on the *Yttria*. I believe I'm booked here."

As the big man referred to his lists, North lit a cigarette, shocked and angry to find his hands shaking. He tried to identify the nationalities of the other people in the lobby from pictures he had seen. The tall couple were evidently from the

Vegan System, both fully seven feet in height, their skins tanned almost black by Vega's fierce blue sunlight, their hair bleached albino-white, although the woman's shoulder-length curls were tinted lilac. Her dark eyes reminded North of a gazelle's. The pair were talking to two other people barely half their height, with stocky, quick-moving bodies that must have been the product of some heavy-gravity planet. North felt suddenly, vividly aware of the complexity of the pattern of human evolution, now that it had been spreading for hundreds of years across the planets of alien suns. In adjusting to completely outlandish sets of problems, these people must have become quite different in their thinking from Earthmen.

"Room sixty-three-seventeen," said the man behind the desk. He handed North a key, and indicated a line of elevators. "Ride to the sixty-third, and take the belt to the left."

"Could I have my baggage sent up?"

"Think you'll find it's already in your room, sir."

"Thanks." North took the elevator to the sixty-third floor, then rode the moving beltway along the passage until he came to Room 63-17, stepping off into the alcove and unlocking the sliding metal door.

The room was only about ten feet square, but this space was luxurious after the cramped cabin of the ship. Opening off one side was a small bathroom. North inspected it briefly, then checked over his baggage, which had been placed against the wall in the main room.

The single window, a good six-hundred feet above the ground, looked out over lower buildings to the wide expanse of the starport. Beyond was the Mar, stretching to the horizon, its yellowish carpets of floating weed shimmering in the fading daylight, its channel lights showing as flashing points of emerald and magenta fire. On the far side of it, half-visible in the dusk, a line of crooked spire-thin peaks snarled viciously through leaden bars of cloud. Alien, thought North. Alien, the whole damned scene. Everything seemed to emphasise one fact: *He didn't belong here.*

He pressed the button that lowered the folding bed, and sprawled full-length on it, looking up at a ceiling decorated in an arabesque pattern of strange-looking crimson vines. The effect was outlandish. He closed his eyes.

Better run over the entire sequence of facts as he knew them. First, his selection as Terran Representative—that had been as big a surprise to him as to anyone else he knew. Why should an Isolationist-dominated government select him, the most vocal-anti-isolationist on Earth? Second-preference votes was a thin explanation—too thin to merit a second thought. But why else? The fact remained that he was here.

Yet where was he? Alone on a backwater planet half-way between Earth and Xaron. On a planet where someone had tried to kill him as soon as he arrived. With a Xarian weapon. Why?

If the Xarians wanted to kill him, why not wait until he had reached their own planet? There would be a thousand possibilities of an easily arranged "accident" once he was there.

He smiled grimly as he thought of his arrival. No official welcome. Not even anyone to meet him. He thought of the passing feeling that the sunburnt man inside the doorway of the Customs House might have given an unobtrusive signal to a welcoming committee . . .

Wait a minute. Signal to a welcoming committee?

Signal to the man who had fired at him from the balcony? That meant there had been five men in the team against him—the sunburnt man, the gunman, the two who had blocked his pursuit on the stairs, the man who had driven the car away.

Why was that fellow sunburnt? Why *him*, and no-one else? Was it because he was not used to conditions in Morak? Because he had been here only a day or two?

They had known when he was arriving, and what he looked like. *Probably they knew he was here.* Here in his hotel room like a sitting duck, waiting for them to come and finish the job they had bungled in the Customs House.

The thought brought Edison North to his feet in the middle of the room, his heart suddenly hammering. He took a step towards the door, then froze at the shrill note of the buzzer.

He stood perfectly still, waiting, wondering if whoever was outside could hear the pounding of his heart. The buzzer shrilled again. For a long time there was no sound, and North did not dare to wipe away the drops of sweat that were trickling down his forehead.

Then a key began to turn in the lock.

Chapter Three

The door began to slide open, and North stood flat against the wall beside it, muscles taut. The man who stepped quickly into the room was slim as a ferret and completely hairless, his lashless brown eyes flicking with an observant tenseness. He spun round to face North, his right hand in his pocket.

"Can I help you?" asked North. Even as he said it, the phrase sounded completely ridiculous to him.

The brown eyes had the void fixity of a predatory animal's. "Edison North?"

North nodded, bringing his weight imperceptibly forward on the balls of his feet, hands open at his sides.

The other man reached over to the sliding door as though to close it. "I—" he began, but he stopped as the sound of voices came from the direction of the elevators. A number of people were approaching along the passageway. "I didn't realise you hadn't settled in yet," said the slim man, evidently changing his mind about closing the door. "I just wanted to check over your room. It only became vacant a couple of hours ago."

The voices came closer, then continued in the same place at one of the other doors a short distance away.

"Will you be going out later in the evening?" asked the slim man.

"I haven't decided," said North.

"Then I won't disturb you." As though at an afterthought the slim man looked around the room, walked over to the TV set and switched it on and off again, then glanced in the bathroom. "Everything seems to be in order," he said almost hastily. "Good night."

Quickly he moved to the door and was gone. The voices outside still continued for a half minute, then there was the sound of a door closing and footsteps receding along the passage. He heard the sound of the elevator.

North glanced outside, but the passage was now empty—threateningly empty, with its long lines of doors and its silent corners. He had a compelling desire to get out of here—fast. He made a move to pack his baggage in a less obtrusive place, then decided it could wait.

Swift though it was, the elevator took what seemed to him an interminable time to drop the sixty-three levels to the main

floor. He strode towards the street, then as a thought struck him he turned to the reception desk.

"Did someone just come up to look over my room?" he asked. "Number 63-17, North."

The dark man shook his head. "The room would have been checked over before you arrived. Oh, wait a minute." He pulled a note-pad across his desk and looked at it. "There was a man here looking for you before you came. Man called Vorn. Know him?"

"Never heard of him. Vorn, you said? What did he look like? Small and slim?"

The man behind the desk shook his head emphatically. "Not this fellow. Big fellow, blonde hair, big jaw. Xarian."

North felt an uneasy tension in the pit of his stomach. "You're sure he was Xarian?"

"Sure. You know the look they have. Came striding in here as if he owned the damned planet." The dark man grinned suddenly, as though to retract the resentment in his words. "He said he'd be back about 1900 hours."

It was dark when North reached the street, the stars coldly brilliant in the black sky. When he reached the plaza facing the spaceport the night opened empty and vast before him, with a small crimson moon throwing very little light. The constellations seemed much the same as those seen from Earth—the eleven light-years difference in viewpoint made little change, although he noticed that Altair looked incredibly bright and near, brighter than Sirius, and shifted out of Aquila towards Sagittarius. His own familiar sun, which he could not pick out, would be just another yellow star near Sirius and Alpha Centauri.

The Morengo was a towering structure of fluted silver metal, its thousands of windows facing the port a blaze of chequered light. North walked into the reception room and stood, hesitant. Was he right in contacting Kranson?

At least, Kranson had saved his life. He was the only man in Morak he felt he could trust even fifty per cent of the way, and at least he seemed to know his way about the place.

Yet he was a Xarian; and it had been a Xarian weapon that had been used to try to kill him. And this man Vorn, also from Xaron—how had he known he was at the Ishtar?

A frightening thought began to seep into his mind. Suppose the Isolationists had been right, after all, in their policy of

keeping Earth segregated from the complex human jungle of the Galactic Federation? They had painted horrific pictures of extra-Terrene human civilizations as a ruthless combination of advanced technology and barbarism. All these years he had fought these ideas at every step. But had he been wrong?

He looked about the Morengo's huge, brightly-lit lounge, with its transparent walls facing the plaza. Making up his mind suddenly, he walked across to the reception desk and asked for Rus Kranson.

The girl behind the desk pressed a button on a switchboard, looking out past North across the plaza with bored, heavy-lidded eyes. Her full lips were painted a startling violet.

"He doesn't answer."

North hesitated. "I'll wait."

He sat down in one of the deep plastifoam chairs in the lounge, looking at a transparent wall behind which fantastic dragon-like fish swam among strange marine plants in an aquarium. On the other walls were ever-changing pictures, abstracts with shifting patterns of coloured light and scenes of weird countryside under tinted suns.

People came and went, passing in and out between the wide transparent doors to the street and the line of elevator-galleries. They displayed an incredible diversity of physique, of colouring, of styles of dress. The nagging doubt that had sprung up in North's mind began to grow. He visualized these people in Earth's cities—Xarian, Vegan, Altairian, others utterly unknown to him—each group of them bringing with them a viewpoint edged further and further away from the Terrestrial norm by generation after generation spent under alien conditions. He tried to imagine their impact on Terrestrial way of life.

"Calling Lars Vorn." A voice from a public-address system suddenly filled the lounge. "Visiphone call for Lars Vorn."

Vorn! That was the name of the Xarian who had been looking for him at the Ishtar. North looked about the lounge, but none of the people in view seemed to be taking any notice of the call.

"Calling Lars Vorn." The call was repeated twice after an interval of about a minute, and then it was evidently assumed that Vorn was not present. But he must have been registered here at the Morengo.

North watched a group of people come out of the elevator galleries, half-expecting one of them to be Vorn—he felt he would have known him from the description the man at the Ishtar had given him. But none of them could have been described as big and blonde and looking as if they owned the planet. None of them looked Xarian—with the possible exception of one of the women.

She was tall and slender, dressed entirely in black, her long legs encased in close-fitting trousers, a coat slung loosely from her shoulders. She was quite young, but her head was completely, startlingly bald. She stood for a moment looking about the lounge with piercing grey eyes, then walked across and sat down in the chair opposite North, crossing one leg over the other. She gave him a direct impersonal stare, then took a paper from the pocket of her coat and began to read.

North remained tensely watchful. Once he chilled with an icy alertness as a dark, thick-set man passed through the lounge—a man who might just possibly have been the one who had fired at him in the Customs House. But there was no sign of recognition as their eyes met for a moment.

He glanced again at the woman in black, and realised that the strangeness of her appearance was not due to the baldness alone, but to the fact that she was devoid of ears. He thought of a report he had read—probably unsubstantiated—of a tribe of radiation-mutants who had lost the sense of hearing, but who were reputed to be telepathic. He shoved it aside as nonsense, then felt a wave of uncertainty as the woman's mouth instantly dimpled in a repressed smile. For a second, her eyes looked into his, bright and direct and penetrating, and then she continued reading.

North shivered slightly and rose to his feet. There was a lot he had yet to learn about the complexities of human civilization outside of Earth. He felt lost and alone.

He thought of leaving a message for Kranson, then decided against it. He walked out on to the plaza, and turned in the direction of the Ishtar. It was nearing 1900 hours—the time Vorn said he would be back. He might at least get a chance to look at him, and make up his mind whether or not it was wise to contact him.

The street was almost deserted, but when he glanced back as he was turning the corner he saw the tall figure of the woman in black emerge from the door of the Morengo, slipping her arms into the sleeves of her coat and fastening it about her slim body as she walked in his direction.

He went on his way. The fact that the woman was following him didn't disturb him at first, until he remembered the compact effectiveness of the weapons some of these people used. He was glad when he was inside the lobby of the Ishtar.

He walked out of the elevator on the sixty-third floor and stepped onto the beltway—then, almost immediately, he sprang off it again. A hundred feet away along the passage, a man was just disappearing into North's room—he knew it was his room as it was next to a cross-passage. He stood waiting to see if the man came out again immediately, as he would no doubt do if he had made a simple mistake.

North hadn't had a chance to see much of him—just a brief glimpse of a medium-sized figure vanishing within the doorway a fraction of a second after he had stepped on the beltway.

Perhaps twenty seconds after the man had entered his room, a blinding flash of light filled the passage opposite his door, and the shock-wave of a violent explosion struck North with an almost stunning impact. The door and the metal wall of the room adjoining the passage burst out in ragged fragments shot with electric-blue flame. Then there was nothing but a whirl of smoke and sparks, the thunderous, echoing roar of the blast.

The moving beltway ground to a halt, and along the passage doors began to open. Voices were screaming. Running feet pounded.

North stepped back to the elevator, which had not yet left the floor, and a moment later he was pressing the button for the main floor. As the elevator dropped swiftly downward he leaned against its smooth wall, his thoughts sorting themselves out into a sharp, clear picture that he didn't like to look at.

Whoever the man was who had entered his room, it was impossible that he could have survived the blast. Obviously it had been meant for North. Had the man he had seen tried to plant a bomb in his room, and had it accidentally exploded while he had been setting it? Or had it been put there before, and had he simply walked into a trap set for North?

His baggage! That was the greatest possibility. While he had been at the Security station, there would have been plenty of opportunities to put a trap in his baggage. The sweat trickled down his forehead as he remembered how close he had come to putting his belongings away before going out to the Morengo. Now that he came to think of it, he hadn't touched his bags since his arrival.

When he stepped out of the elevator on the main floor there was a fire-alarm ringing somewhere, and a number of the hotel staff were rushing in different directions. He walked through the lobby and out into the dark, sweltering night.

He had the absurd feeling that these things couldn't happen. You read about such acts of violence in historical novels, back on Earth. Feuds between gangsters and cowboys, back in the days before space travel, a thousand years ago. Fun to read about, or to watch on TV, because it was all so remote, so impossible in the enlightened days of the World Government.

Yet here, right here and right now in the Thirtieth Century, men were playing the same game with weapons that made the ancient gangsters' and cowboys' firearms mere toys in comparison. And he, Edison North, was the victim !

He, Edison North, Terran Representative to the Galactic Federation Council's Mid-Year Assembly. Representative of the original centre of all human culture, the man who had fought to integrate Earth into the Federation ; and here attempts had been made to blast him to ashes, to blow him out of existence, and nobody seemed to care.

Had the Isolationists been right all along the line ? Was *this* why he had been selected as Representative ? Had they sent him out into this human jungle so that he could learn the lesson they had been trying to teach him first-hand, and learn it the bitterest and most final way ?

Useless to go to Morak Security. They were definitely not interested. No Terran Embassy here, and to go to the Xarian Embassy might be walking straight into the ultimate trap.

He was going to have to get out of his difficulties alone.

The odd fact was this : as he walked along the dark street, vividly aware that any second might be his last, he felt more intensely alive than at any time he could remember. As he walked he heard the sound of sirens coming rapidly closer, and he sprang aboard a moving beltway leading inland through the dark city, away from the port.

Chapter Four

Lars Vorn leaned forward as he spoke, his hand slamming emphatically on the Consul's desk. "It was your responsibility to see that he was watched all the time he was on Morak."

The Consul shook his head. "I disagree. You don't realise the complexity of Xaron's position here on Morak. The

people have very little desire to become involved in Galactic politics. I can try to find him—but it's going to be difficult without the co-operation of Security."

"I'll talk to Security. I have to get that gun from them, for one thing. And then—" Suddenly Lars Vorn ceased speaking staring straight ahead of him. The Consul looked at him in surprise.

"Something's happened," said Vorn, almost as if he were speaking to himself. His eyes met the Consul's again. "Can you let me have a car?"

The Consul looked down at his desk. "They're all Consulate cars. Both the ground-cars and the aircars. It's highly irregular for anyone other than staff personnel to use them." When he looked up, Vorn's eyes held his.

"Can you let me have a car?" It was phrased like a request, but it had in it something of a command. Without realising exactly why he did it, the Consul took a key from his desk and handed it across to Vorn.

"The blue Eighty-Nine outside," he said almost wearily.

"Thank you," Vorn turned to the door. "I'll be back."

Outside, he ran in long, springing strides, getting the full advantage of his powerful muscles in the light gravity. He located the car and drove off along the plaza to the westward.

Near 280th Street he pulled in to the kerb briefly and sat as though listening. When he drove on again he travelled slowly, swinging into 283rd Street by the rising curve of ramp. He cruised very slowly, now, at little more than walking speed, his eyes moving quickly between the road and the dark shadowed buildings on the opposite side.

He located her a block away from the plaza, standing in a doorway. He pulled in, glancing in his rear-view mirror, then swung the car in a smooth, fast arc to the far side of the street.

"Maia," he said quietly. She couldn't have heard him even had he shouted, but he had found that vocalizing was the easiest way to get a clear-cut idea to her. Immediately she moved out from the doorway, and as he pressed the button which slid open the near-side door of the car she slipped in beside him.

Get away from here, quickly. She emphasised the thought with a gesture of her hand. The stream of her thoughts had fear and violence and confusion in it. She wanted him to get her back to her hotel room, but cutting across this thought like

an interference-pattern of waves was an irritation at her own panic and fear for her personal safety.

He stopped the car on the side of the plaza not far from the Morengo. He looked up at the small crimson moon in the jet-black, star-drenched sky, and as she caught his mental picture of it her eyes followed his. Gradually he felt her mind quietening down. After a while she wanted a cigarette, and he took a pack from his pocket and offered her one, lighting it for her. She thanked him with a movement of her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Yes, she was all right now he was here. Suddenly she sat upright, twisting around in her seat to face him, her eyes steady and calm again. She had contacted Edison North—it must have been him, judging from the fragmenta of mental pictures of the man. He had got the half-feeling she might be telepathic, and had gone back to his hotel. She had followed. Inside the hotel, where she had lost trace of him among thousands of other people, there had been some violent explosion—she had felt the shock of it in the pavement with her feet, and the rush of air in her face even out in the street. That was when he had picked up her sudden fear, when he had been in the Consul's office.

A slim, hairless, brown-eyed man had come out of the Ishtar and had run along past her to the public visiphone booths across the street. She had picked up extreme agitation in him, as though some plan had gone wrong. He had phoned through to someone with a name like Adam or Adams. The sound of a name meant nothing to her, but she had picked up rather dimly the written outline of a word, as somebody might jot it in a notebook.

"How about Edison North—the Representative from Earth?"

He had come out a minute or so after the explosion. He had been afraid, but his fear was not out of control. He had gone inland, with the object of losing himself in the city. No objective, because the parts of the city away from the starport were completely unknown to him.

Lars Vorn looked about him at the angular buildings with their bright chequerboard windows, sharp against the night sky.

"Six million people," he said. "He's in a city of six million people—and we have to find him by tomorrow!"

Edison North had the feeling that the further he got away from the spaceport and the Ishtar and the Morengo the better was his chance of watching tomorrow's sunrise.

He rode the beltway for perhaps a mile, passing avenue after avenue of close-packed, varied buildings. Then he stepped off the belts and walked down a ramp to another beltway running off at right angles to the right. He rode this for maybe a couple of miles, when it ended at the side of a broad river.

He walked along the quay lining the river, where long cybernetically-controlled sea-vessels were being unloaded. There were men about the wharves, mostly operating handling-machines, but they paid no attention to him. At a line of brightly-lit wharves ahead of him, large jet-driven hydroplanes were coming and going, ferrying passengers and vehicles across the wide estuary to a line of lights on the far shore, sweeping across the dark water with a red glare of flame.

Behind the quay were a number of cafes, and North realised when he saw them that he was hungry. He had not eaten since he had left the ship.

He looked in through the window of one of the quayside buildings, which appeared to be a combined bar and automat, with tables in separate booths, each with four seats. After watching the crowd of men inside for a few seconds, North entered through the revolving door and walked over to the bar. He stood at the counter, waiting until he had the barman's attention.

"Can you change a ten-credit bill?"

The barman looked at him suspiciously. He was a lean, sour-looking man with a crooked scar across his forehead. He looked at the bill as North passed it across to him, holding it close to one of the fluorescent lights and turning it over to examine both sides of it.

"One minute," he said with a curious accent, and went along to a more heavily-built man in a small office off the end of the bar. This man examined the bill, looked thoughtfully out at North for a few seconds, then shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

North found himself in possession of a dozen strangely-coloured plastic bills and a number of assorted coins of a yellowish, coppery metal, some with holes in their centres. He

bought a drink with one of the larger coins, and stood sipping it. He had no idea what it was—everything here seemed to have a name that was strange to him—but the stuff tasted like some kind of fermented fruit juice laced with methyl alcohol. The fumes hit him in the back of the nose after the second swallow, and he stood with the glass in his hand watching the TV screen above the bar.

Most of the other men in the bar were looking at the screen avidly. It was showing what appeared to be the closing scenes of some historical drama set in the days of the old Altair Empire, with violent action involving men who wore blast-pistols in holsters on their hips, and women in close-fitting suits. He watched it blaze to its climax, taking another sip at his drink and looking about the dim-lit bar.

A news sequence came on the screen. The opening of a new city on Shaula 15, newest large-scale project of the Xarian Empire, with close-ups of huge atomic-powered installations scattered planet-wide to change the atmosphere of the uninhabited world to make it breathable within a year. Following this came a local news coverage, headed by a Security announcement.

Some man wanted urgently by Security. A reward for anyone giving information leading to his discovery, information to be sent either to the Xarian Consulate or to Security Headquarters. North, his drink raised to his lips, almost choked as his own picture filled the screen, clear and unmistakable.

He heard the accompanying voice—bomb outrage, this man suspected of manslaughter. The picture, he realised, had been taken as he had entered the brightly-lit anteroom at Security Headquarters—he saw now the reason for the battery of lights which had given him the feeling of being on a stage; they must have kept a filmed record of anyone who entered the place. He saw his own image walk on to the screen, half-turn to look at the door on the right, then walk off. The sequence, together with the message, was repeated.

North put his glass on the counter and walked towards the door.

"Hey!" shouted the barman. "Hey—you!"

North didn't turn his head. He reached the revolving door, aware of a confused shouting behind him. As he pushed through the door, he saw half the men who had been at the bar rushing towards it.

Emerging, he gripped the edge of the door with both hands and put all his strength into a tremendous swing that set it spinning wildly. With the same movement he flung himself into a desperate run for the nearest corner, the light gravity permitting him gigantic strides.

From the corner he glimpsed men bursting from the revolving door one at a time, three, four, five of them already in the street. The first was forty yards behind him.

He kept running, his feet pounding on the cement sidewalk. He was in an old part of the town, with none of the clean-cut metal skyscrapers similar to those near the spaceport—a complex maze of narrow alleys between buildings of brown-stone and ferro-concrete. He ran without trying to keep any overall sense of direction, turning corners frequently and at random.

Behind, he could hear the confused shouting of his pursuers. Now and then they came within sight of him, but only for a matter of seconds at a time.

His lungs were rasping with the effort of breathing rapidly and deeply in the thin atmosphere. He began to search frantically for cover. His feet were hitting the pavement flatly and heavily now, and he was staggering as he ran, with the sensation of iron bands constricting his chest and the muscles of his calves.

He swung into a short lane linking two larger streets, and halted as he heard the sound of shouts and footsteps beyond the corner ahead of him, mingling with similar sounds from behind. He wiped the back of a shaking hand across his sweating forehead.

The buildings to either side of the lane were old apartment blocks, each with a metal fire-escape stairway zig-zagging from top to bottom. North saw a window open on a first-floor landing, and as the shouting grew louder at each end of the lane he sprang up the metal stairs, swinging through the open window into the dark room beyond. He slid the window shut and locked it. An instant later, he heard running steps thundering along the lane.

At the same time, footsteps sounded in the adjoining room. Surprised to find that he felt no trace of panic, North crossed the dim-lit room and flattened against the wall beside the door. On a shelf near him were some books and a heavy rectangular

ashtray. He snatched up the ashtray, holding it in his hand as if it were a gun.

The door slid open, and a flabby-looking man about the same height as North stepped into the room, head thrust forward, jaw swinging loosely as he stared at the closed window. North stepped close against him, clapping a hand over his mouth and ramming the ashtray hard against his ribs.

"One sound, and I'll blow you apart!" He kept his voice hard and tense. The man stiffened, his eyes rolling whitely in the semi-darkness. North was suddenly thankful that he had once played in amateur drama. Maybe it was the scourge of necessity—but he amazed himself at the venom he was able to put into a quiet whisper. "Do exactly as I tell you, and you'll be all right. Anyone else in there?"

The man shook his head as much as North's vice-like grip would allow him.

The confused thunder of steps echoed again along the lane outside. "He can't be far away," shouted a voice. "Try over those walls."

North steered his victim through the doorway into the next room, shutting the door behind them with his foot. It was a cheaply-furnished living-room, with a kitchenette opening off one side. North satisfied himself that there was no way out of the kitchenette, then shoved the other man inside it and closed the sliding door. He used several turns of the flex of a standard lamp to tie the handle of the door to a wall-fixture so that the man inside couldn't slide it open. He stood for a few seconds looking about the room. Three or four half-hearted knocks sounded on the tied door.

"Quiet!" said North with a tone of repressed ferocity. The knocking was not repeated.

Opening a built-in wardrobe, North found a long hooded cloak, the hood coming well forward to shield the wearer from Morak's blistering red sunlight. He slipped it on, and found that served his purpose well enough. He had a momentary twinge of regret for inconveniencing the other man, but consoled himself with the thought that he was giving the fellow a topic of conversation that would last him for years. He went quietly out through the front door of the apartment, leaving it unlocked. A minute later he was in the street outside. None of his pursuers were in sight.

North walked along until he came to one of the large avenues with beltways lining the sidewalks, and soon he was being carried rapidly away from the area, the river behind him.

At least, he had escaped immediate danger, but that didn't alter the fact that half the people in the city had probably seen his picture on the TV by now. He was glad the avenue was almost deserted—apparently the people of Morak didn't spend much time out of doors at night.

When the beltway carried him to a place where it skirted a wide, dark stretch of park, North stepped across the slower zones of the belts and off onto the pathway alongside. He walked slowly into the dimly lit park, which was laid out in a series of formal pathways and gardens. Passing a dense growth of strange-looking vegetation, he stepped off the path and stood for a time in the shadows.

There was nobody within sight. He was suddenly aware of an overwhelming weariness. He moved deeper into the grove of trees, crouching beneath their thin, wiry branches from which long lance-shaped leaves drooped. He lay down. The soil had a peculiar, unfamiliar smell that was subtly different from that of any soil he had known. The drooping foliage shut out the sky overhead, but from its dense shadow he could look out through the net of slender, twisted tree-trunks in every direction across the park.

On every side of him stretched the city, dark and unfriendly and threatening. Tomorrow, the Alt-Vega liner was leaving for Xaron at 1700 hours—and he had to be on it. Yet how was he to get aboard, with the entire city searching for him, and at least one group of men waiting to kill him on sight?

Fortunately, the destruction of the papers he had been taking to the Council Assembly was not of major importance, as he was carrying a microfilm copy of all of them in an envelope sealed in the lining of his clothing. As he thought of this, he was surprised to find that he still retained an inner certainty that somehow—*somehow*—he would be present at the Assembly.

But how? He closed his eyes. How? . . .

He awoke, stiff in every muscle and ravenously hungry, with hot red sunlight striking through the trees.

Chapter Five

In the first few seconds, staring about him in that weird sunrise, North felt utterly lost and hopeless. The lawns of the park were not grass, but dark blue moss, and the trees and the grotesque flowers were like nothing on the face of the Earth. He sat up, stretching his arms and legs painfully as he yawned himself fully awake.

The strokes of a bell cut sharply through the roar of distant beltways and traffic. He glanced at his watch, but its time meant nothing—he had no way of adjusting it to Morak's thirty-hour day. He sat rigidly motionless as the shadow of a low-flying aircar moved across the ground beyond the trees, pausing as though the craft were hovering.

Security on the lookout for him? He waited for the shadow to sharpen as the car sank to a landing, but after a few seconds it moved onward. He waited for several minutes, then moved carefully out from the trees, pulling the hood of the cloak forward to screen his face as much as possible. Unhurriedly he walked along the pathway.

Across the street from the park was a line of shops, and a truck pulled up in front of them, painted in blue, gold and red bands, looked oddly familiar until he realised that it was painted in the same way as the trucks of World Holdings Incorporated, one of the largest industrial combines on Earth. Was it possible that W.H.I. had a subsidiary here?

He moved closer. Sure enough, neat lettering on the side of the truck spelled out WORLD HOLDINGS (MORAK) INC. At first he found it hard to believe, until he remembered that the company had been in existence for hundreds of years, even back to the time when most of the industry in Morak had been controlled from Earth. Beneath the name in small lettering was the corporation's head office address: Corner Hyades Avenue and 250th Street, Morak 1.

World Holdings Incorporated, controllers of the most complex transport and TV networks on Earth, had been the driving-force behind the Isolationist party ever since its inception. On Earth they had been no friends of North, whose policy had stood at the opposite pole from theirs. Yet here, ironically enough, they were his safest refuge. At least, their top-level executives would be Earthmen.

The beltways were thronged with people, now, on their way from their homes to their myriad places of work, but none of them paid any attention to North as he crossed the city. Fortunately, he had now realised that the avenues crossing Morak were named in alphabetical order, and with the streets numbered from the east he was able to find his way directly to the address he had seen. The dark purple sky was clearer this morning than it had been at sunset the previous day, and the sunlight had a dry, fierce heat. The majority of the people riding the beltways wore hooded cloaks similar to the one North was using, and he felt little fear of discovery.

The office building of World Holdings (Morak) Inc. was a towering structure of old rectilinear Brazilian style of architecture, its high, flat walls a chequerboard pattern of blue and red and gold. North stood looking at it for a time from the formal gardens of the square opposite, deciding on his best course of action. At last, he walked into the large ground-floor hall, with its transparent wall looking out over the park and its long enquiry desks. A large organization chart on the wall showed the names of the executives. He picked the name of the corporation's Communications Director, and walked across to the switch-desk.

"Could I see Mr. Grunsdon? I have no appointment, but I'm passing through Morak from Earth."

"Your name, please?" The receptionist was lank and dark and obviously not Earth-born.

"North." He felt his palms moist as he waited for the call to be put through. The receptionist listened at a phone for a few moments, then looked across at North.

"Would you be Mr. *Edison* North?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Grunsdon will see you right away. I'll get someone to take you up."

North found himself conveyed to the elevators by a man of Herculean proportions, evidently Vegan, a full head taller than North's six feet, fast-moving in spite of his immense bulk. He said nothing as they rode the elevator to the uppermost floor of the building, maybe four hundred feet above ground. He was shown in to a huge, glass-walled office which looked out on an aircar landing-platform.

Grunsdon, who rose from behind a desk as he entered, at least had the appearance of an Earthman, although North couldn't have been sure. He had the ponderous bulk of a man

who had once been athletic, but had let his physique soften with the years. His cheeks sagged and there were deep pouches under his small, alert eyes.

"I see from the TV you're in trouble," he said boisterously, as though it was something that could be dispelled with a hearty laugh. "Sit down and tell me about it."

North sketched in a brief picture of what had happened to him. The shooting in the Customs House, the complete shrugging off of responsibility by Morak Security, the explosion in his room, the broadcast over the TV. Grunsdon listened attentively, nodding.

"You're lucky you found me," he said. "I think your best plan is to head straight back to Earth."

North shook his head. "I'm going on to Xaron."

Grunsdon lit a cigar. "I'd think it over, if I were you. These Xarians are a complicated lot. They play the game hard. Play for keeps."

North studied him thoughtfully. "If they wanted me out of the way, why not wait until I was on their own planet?"

Grunsdon took the cigar out of his mouth and stared with intense concentration at the tip of it. Then he looked across at North as if he had just heard his question. "As I said, they're a complicated lot. Shrewd, mind you. Don't ever make any mistake about that. Maybe they thought it'd be bad publicity if anything happened to you on their own planet."

An intercom at Grunsdon's elbow buzzed, and he pressed down a switch, bending close to the set. In the quiet of the room North was able to hear the faint, tinny voice from the speaker: "Adams to see you Chief."

"Not now. Five minutes, ten minutes. Keep him there." Grunsdon snapped off the switch and turned his attention to North again, after a glance at his watch. "So you want to take the risk and go on to Xaron?"

North nodded. "I've got to be aboard the Alt-Vega liner at 1700 today."

"Tell you what I'll do. You can't stay in the city—everybody's seen your face on TV. We've a place out of town—a house attached to an old ore-crushing plant that we don't use any more. You'll be safe there until the liner's ready to leave, and we can fly you straight to the port in time for takeoff."

"Isn't that putting you to a lot of trouble?"

Grunsdon laughed. "We Earthmen must stick together. I'll get you an aircar right away."

He didn't use the intercom, but went out into an adjoining room, closing the door behind him. North looked about the office, with the vague feeling that something was wrong. Maybe it was the fact that Grunsdon didn't look like the Communications Director of a large corporation. Maybe it was simply that the office didn't fit the personality of the man. Grunsdon was the name on the organization chart downstairs, but after all this man hadn't *said* he was Grunsdon.

He saw a number of letters in an "out" basket on the desk, and moved over to look at the signature, but before he could do so the door slid open and the man returned.

"Got it all fixed," he said. "Car's on its way round."

Within a minute, a black aircar landed on the stage outside. The gigantic Vegan reappeared, and conducted North out to the car, in which a lean scarecrow of a man sat at the controls. North climbed aboard, and the Vegan sat beside him.

As the car took off, he glanced at the large window-wall of the office he had just left. The man who had interviewed him had been joined by another, who looked up as the aircar took off. The second man was gaunt and sunburnt, the skin peeling from his forehead and nose.

He was the man who had given the signal at the door of the Customs House.

Lars Vorn's stride was long and free and confident as he entered the Consul's office. He placed a brief-case on the desk and zipped it open.

"Here's the gun." He took the weapon from the case and laid it in front of the Consul, who picked it up and inspected it closely, trying the sighting-beam briefly.

"Old model," he said. "Eighty, a hundred years old. Did you have any trouble getting Security to part with it?"

Vorn shook his head. The Consul wondered whether he *ever* had any trouble. He locked the gun away in a safe, while Vorn lit a cigarette and studied the collection of coloured planetary globes along the top of a broad bookcase, spinning one of them slowly on its tilted axis to look at its ragged continents. He glanced across at the Consul.

"Karkemish," he said, indicating a place on the globe. "I was out there about five standard years ago. Deadly climate—they still hadn't finished modifying the atmosphere." He

broke off and glanced towards the door. "Here's Maia."

The Consul involuntarily followed his glance, but Vorn smiled. "She'll be here in two or three minutes. I think she's found something."

She had. That was obvious even to the Consul, who had little experience with telepaths, as soon as she entered the room. She handed Vorn a list of Morak organizations with Earth associations, a list which Ryson had brought with him. Vorn saw a red mark against World Holdings (Morak) Incorporated. He looked questioningly at the girl.

"This is what I've been looking for," he told the Consul. "She's been calling around these places with Kranson's secretary. What do you know about World Holdings?"

"Not much. Earth firm originally, but there's only a slight tie-up with Earth capital now."

"Maia picked up something wrong there. A lot of doubt and uncertainty—someone recently arrived from some place off the planet. A name like Adams—remember that?—the name of the man who was notified by phone after the explosion in North's hotel-room."

The Consul nodded slowly. "Can you handle this? I'd prefer not to be directly involved."

"Kranson can help me." Vorn took a small radio from his pocket, no larger than a cigarette pack, but with a complex dial-system. He held it close to his mouth, after pressing a number of small coloured studs in a certain order. "Rus, can you meet me outside the Consulate in five minutes? Oh, on the landing-stage? That's fine."

He snapped off the switch and stood for a moment balancing the radio on his palm. "Compact, but powerful. I used this to call him from the ship, while he was in the *Yttria*. We'd just come into the approach hyperbola, and the *Yttria* was in its landing spiral. Half a million miles apart. Just as well he was aboard—if it hadn't been for him, North wouldn't have lasted here ten minutes."

The Consul looked thoughtfully at the set. "How many part-time operators like Kranson have you these days?"

"Almost every Xarian who travels from system to system." Vorn gestured with the radio before slipping it back in his pocket. "All carrying these. With a thousand worlds in the Federation, we have to be fast on our feet."

He moved towards the door. As the girl followed, her bright grey eyes looked probingly into the Consul's, and he hastily tried to suppress the vague, resentful thought that the ever-accelerating tempo was growing too much for him.

When they had gone he walked across to the window ; an aircar dropped steeply to the landing stage jutting wing-like from the Consulate, and a few seconds later it rose again. The Consul watched it out of sight, then looked across the red-lit city.

The vertical shimmer of a barrier-field took his attention to the spaceport, and he watched the long silver projectile shape of one of the Alt-Vega starliners dropping smoothly to a landing. Soon it would be off again for Xaron—with Edison North aboard.

. . . Or without him . . .

Chapter Six

On the flight across Morak in the black aircar, North found many parts of the puzzle falling into place with a frightening clarity.

The sunburnt man who had given the signal at the Customs House had been the man who had come to see Grunsdon while North had been with him—if the man he had interviewed had really been Grunsdon. The more he thought back, the less he was satisfied that the man fitted the role of Communications Director of a large organization.

Again, that voice over the intercom : “ Adams to see you, Chief.” It had sounded exactly like the voice of the big Vegan who now sat beside him.

Through sheer fatigue, he had walked straight into a trap. A thousand feet below, the buildings of Morak swung past, progressively smaller as the aircar travelled further away from the centre of the city. They passed over the wide river-estuary, and away to the right the Ri'oro Mar stretched darkly to the blurred horizon, smeared with its yellow swathes of weed. Ahead, the buildings thinned to a bare, reddish landscape of almost Martian aridity, dappled with straggling growths of blue scrub.

North turned to the Vegan. “ I have a better plan. Set me down near the outskirts of the city—within walking distance of the streets.”

The Vegan shook his head. The movement was ponderous, but his dark eyes were hotly alert. "I take my orders from the Chief."

"Who's that?" asked North quickly.

"Suppose we don't waste breath talking. Just relax."

North carefully measured his chances of success in a surprise physical attack, but dropped the idea almost at once. The Vegan was gigantic, superhumanly powerful by Earth standards, product of a planet where the human body had evolved to match the fierce vitality of local life-forms.

The aircar crossed an immense tract of swamp, with laced channels of muddy water dotted and streaked with slimy mangrove-like trees. On the far side of it, the ground lifted in red, barren slopes seamed with deep, jagged arroyos, and on the top of a desolate plateau ahead North could see the corroded ruins of vast machinery. Beside these was a plain Quonset-type building of some non-tarnishing metal that might have stood there for centuries. The aircar dropped alongside it.

"Straight over into that doorway," ordered the Vegan.

North stepped out as the door of the aircar slid open. In the semicircular end wall of the building a central door stood open, a black rectangle of shadow within which he saw something flash briefly in the reflected light. He looked about him. There was no sign of life within many miles—the palisade of Morak's pin-point skyscrapers gleamed along the far-off horizon.

North walked across the dry, crumbling soil to the building, passing in through the door. Inside, the place was almost bare of detail—an arched empty shell of metal with dim reddish light filtering through dust-caked windows. Inside were three men, one of them holding a gun—a light old-fashioned automatic rifle.

It was the man with the gun who held North's attention. He was thick-set and dark, with quick-moving black eyes. He was the man who had run along the gallery at the Customs House—the man who had fired at him. His teeth gleamed whitely in a hard smile.

"We've met before," he said. "Sit down."

With the automatic rifle pointing at his chest, North sat on one of the rusted metal chairs scattered around a long, plastic-topped table of which just one end had been swept clear of a

thick coating of dust. A great weariness came to him. He looked about him.

The big Vegan stood near the door. The thick-set man sat on the edge of the table, the rifle unwavering as it covered North's heart. The other two men stood a few yards off. One he recognized as one of the men who had obstructed him on the stairway at the Customs House. The other was the small, ferret-faced man who had entered his room at the Ishtar.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked.

For a quarter of a minute the thick-set man stared at him without change of expression. North slowly took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"I didn't say so," said the thick-set man.

North deliberately took a cigarette from the pack and lit it. He played with the idea of throwing the lighter in the thick-set man's face and springing for the gun, but rejected it. The dark eyes smouldered, but the man made no movement. North smoked quietly on, trying to figure why, if these men wanted him dead, they hadn't shot him straight away.

The silence outside the building was the silence of a planet without air. Then, after what seemed an hour, the thin whine of an aircar crept slowly above the threshold of hearing.

"Here's Adams," said the Vegan.

The sound drew nearer, changing pitch somewhere overhead. A shadow flicked across some of the dusty windows, and then there was silence again, broken after a minute by footsteps crunching on friable soil.

The sunburnt man appeared in the doorway, gaunt and loose-jointed as a marionette, standing slightly side-on with his left side towards them.

"There's been a change of plan." Sweat gleamed on his forehead.

The thick-set man was tensely alert. "Play it any way you like, as long as I get my money."

There was a pause as they faced each other. Suddenly North gave a shout of laughter. He never felt less like laughter in his life, but he made it bitterly convincing. The other man stared at him in astonishment.

"To think I figured you were bright!" He looked scornfully at the thick-set man. "Listen! I know this guy Adams."

"Quiet!" snarled the thick-set man.

For an instant North thought he was going to shoot him right then, but he kept laughing. "Ask him what happened to the gang who did that job for him in Brazil."

"Shut him up !" commanded Adams. "He's only trying to stall."

The thick-set man deliberated for a moment. "Anxious, aren't you? You know what I think? I think we'll have a look at the money first."

Adams' lank figure twisted in sudden movement. The thick-set man half-turned to swing the rifle to cover him, but the Earthman's actions were faster. The slender-barrelled Xarian pistol in his hand whipped from side to side to cover the entire group. North was amazed at the difference in reaction-times—the reverse of what he would have expected.

While they all remained in a frozen tableau, he worked it out. Morak had a lighter gravity than Earth. Things fell more slowly, and were easier to lift. The whole physical tempo of human movement was slower.

Imperceptibly, the big Vegan moved closer to Adams, edging sideways.

"Throw that rifle over the side of the room," snapped Adams. "And don't try anything."

The rifle clattered across the dusty floor. North, able to watch all the others from where he was sitting, found himself intensely aware of their slightest movements. And except in the case of Adams, those movements were slow, with the slowness of a life spent under easy gravity-conditions. Only Adams could have approached his own speed of movement. He leaned forward so that all his weight rested on his feet, his hands gripping the chair so that when a chance came he could whirl it from beneath him.

The chance came almost at once. The Vegan reached out with an incredibly long arm and gripped Adams by the wrist, forcing his arm upward so that the pistol pointed to the roof. Adams screamed in fury as the others closed in.

The thick-set man seized the pistol and wrenched it from Adams' grip, stepping back and turning to make certain North was still sitting as though paralysed with fear.

But North was standing behind him. Even as he turned, the chair crashed in his face.

The pistol boomeranged through the air. It travelled more slowly than it would have done under Earth gravity, and

Edison North caught it in mid-flight. As he backed, the others made a jumbled rush at him. He blinked his eyes shut briefly, at the same time pressing the firing button with the pistol pointed upward.

The flash was brilliant even through his closed eyelids, and the thunderclap of the blast had a stunning violence. He continued to back, while the others reeled half-blinded by the streak of light. Molten drops of metal spattered down from the roof, and the place seemed suddenly lighter. A fleeting upward glance showed him a circular hole big enough for a man's body to pass through.

"Get him!" screeched Adams.

None of the others showed any inclination to try. The thick-set man groaned, rolled to his knees and elbows, and struggled lurching to his feet.

"Back against the wall!" North gestured with the gun. "Now turn to face it. Hands against the wall."

From outside came the hum of an approaching aircar. Adams looked over his shoulder.

"*Face the wall!*" thundered North. "First man to turn his head gets this!"

North moved back, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his free hand, keeping the Xarian pistol on the five men at the wall. He listened to the aircar making a landing outside, then the heavy silence as its motors stilled.

Into his mind came a vivid mental picture, like a sharply recalled memory. It was the picture of a man he had never seen, yet it was shockingly real—the picture of a big, fast-moving man with a jutting jaw and blonde hair. Every detail was incisive: the tight black trousers, the white sleeveless shirt revealing powerful brown arms, the direct blue eyes and the hard, confident smile.

North shoved the image aside from his mind, but it kept coming back, and abruptly he realised that the long, firm strides of the figure were synchronised exactly with the crunch, crunch, crunch of footsteps on the dry soil outside.

For some reason he didn't try to analyse, he felt no fear. He knew, without understanding *how* he knew, that the man outside was not another enemy. He knew it with such certainty that he kept his eyes on the men lined against the wall

even when the blonde man's figure darkened the doorway and his firm step came on across the dusty floor.

"Good work, North," came a deep, resonant voice at his side. "My name is Lars Vorn. I've been looking for you." Suddenly the voice was a peal of thunder. "Adams! Come here! The rest of you stay as you are."

Adams turned and walked across towards the newcomer with limp-hanging arms, like a puppet moved by invisible strings. He walked past North, who heard a faint sound of movement beyond his field of view.

"Back towards the door with me," came Vorn's voice. "There's only the one door to the building. I'll show you what to do when we get to it."

North risked a quick glance towards the door, and saw that Vorn was carrying the limp figure of Adams in his arms as he would have held a tired child. Whatever he had done to him had been swift and silent and effective.

They sidled through the doorway. The door was a single sheet of heavy metal.

"Set the intensity ring of your gun about 3, and widen the flare of the limit. Here." Vorn reached over with one hand and did something with expert speed to the gun. "Now—slam the door."

North did so. There was muffled shouting from inside.

"Step back. Further! Now, play the blast lightly on the door."

The fanned-out blast did not disintegrate the door, but it raised it in a second to a blotchy orange-red glow. North backed further away as the fierce heat struck at him.

"Into the aircar—the white one." Vorn ran lightly across the reddish ground, the unconscious dead-weight of Adams apparently meaning little to him. At the car, he took the gun from North, altered the settings, and fired a thin, crashing blast through the power-units of each of the other aircars.

"Now," he said. "You ride beside him. We haven't much time."

North looked down as the car lifted in a climbing curve towards Morak. In the shadowed end wall of the building, the door still glowed dully red like a Cyclopean eye.

Chapter Seven

The view from Breon's office on the 80th floor of the Federation Council's Secretariat Building held Edison North breathless. From the time the starliner had entered its approach hyperbola a million miles out, already within the complex traffic-control system of Xaron, he had found his sense of perspective changing.

From orbit, he had looked down on an Earth-sized planet, its turquoise oceans barred by an east-west smearing of ragged continents—and already he had been shaken by the prodigious scale of the Xarians' engineering. They had moved entire mountain-ranges, linking land-mass to land-mass to form two continuous continents encircling the globe to the north and south of the equatorial ocean. With most of the evaporation in the tropics and most of the rainfall swelling the polar oceans, the controlled flow of water back to the sunken equatorial seas gave them a planet-wide system of irrigation which ran forever by the power of their sun's heat.

By the time the ship had landed on the Galaxy's mightiest starport, on the edge of the city that was the heart and brain of the Federation that spanned a thousand worlds, North's certainty of Earth's importance had evaporated like a puddle shrinking in hot sunshine.

The next stages of his journey were tinged with the unreality of a nightmare. A flight along a broad canyon between towering mountain-ranges that were not mountain-ranges at all, but buildings on a scale so Titanic that his mind numbed at the effort to take in their full magnitude. Vorn pointed out the mile-square green stepped pyramid that was the Galactic Central Library, and the dazzling white mile-wide facade of the Central Archives Building. Then North found himself utterly overwhelmed by the soaring golden skyscrapers of the Galactic Federation Headquarters.

From this window, a thousand feet above the level plaza that stretched away like a solidified sea, it was hard to realise that there was more of the Secretariat Building above this level than below it.

"Feel that it shakes you a little?" Vorn's voice at his side was not boastful or arrogant. It was so soft that none of the others in the room could have heard it. "Don't try to take in

too much of it at once. Put your hands on the window shelf. Push on it. Hard."

North looked down at his hands pressing on the metal slab. He felt the solidity, the reality of it. As long as he didn't raise his eyes to that impossible view outside, he might have been in a room on Earth. Then he realised that the objects on the shelf cast two divergent shadows, the darker one faintly tinged with green, the other golden, the densest patches of shadow coming where they intersected. He remembered, now, that Zeta Herculis was a binary star, so that Xaron often had two suns in the sky at once. He didn't look up at the sky just yet. Time for that when he had found his bearings better.

"Right," came Breon's voice from across the room. "Let's get started."

North turned. Breon touched a control on his desk, and one wall of the office slid out of sight, suddenly expanding the room to three times its length. In the section newly revealed was a broad table, crescent-shaped, with a number of seats behind it.

"Would you take a seat there?" Breon indicated it with his hand. North sat between Lars Vorn and the investigator, Ryson. Beyond Vorn was the telepath girl, Maia, and two other telepaths, both men, with smoothly hairless heads gleaming in the light from the windows.

Breon pressed a button on his desk. A few seconds later Adams came in with a powerfully built Xarian on each side of him. The trio sat at the far end of the crescent-shaped table, close to the window. Adams looked taut and nervous. He looked out of the window nearest to him just once, and then hastily turned away as though to convince himself that the tremendous vista of the city was not true.

Ryson set up a small projector on the table in front of him, stacking a number of minute carefully-labelled spools beside it. Breon spoke quietly into a small microphone and snapped a number of switches.

"I thought this was to be a public enquiry," North whispered to Vorn.

"It is," said Vorn, nodding towards the wall at the other end of the room. North followed his glance, but could see only a blank metal wall with a number of panels which might have been vision-screens.

Suddenly one of the panels lit up with a fully-coloured three-dimensional picture. The effect was so startling that for a moment North thought a window had opened into an adjoining room, showing a group of stern-faced men sitting at a long table. Then he realised that the other room was somewhere far away, in spite of the clarity of the image. Open windows at the far side of it looked out at ground-level through a green stone colonnade to a garden bordering a river.

Another screen blazed to life, showing a large assembly hall with tier upon tier of crowded seats. A third revealed a group of men at a table on an open terrace, with the background of a seaport beneath a green sky in which a small green sun burned with the pallid glare of an acetylene flame. At first North thought this scene was on another planet, but then he realised it must be half-way around Xaron in the area at present under the second sun.

"First," said Breon impressively, "I must warn all present that these proceedings are being recorded, and also telecast over an extensive network. Is that understood?"

There were some perfunctory murmurs of assent. He looked questioningly about the group, then nodded.

The preliminaries were smooth and rapid. The link-up of three-dimensional screens gave such an illusion of reality that the groups of men scattered around the planet were able to converse as though all were in a single room.

Breon adjusted one of the microphones in front of him. "We have called this meeting," he said, "to investigate an attempt to murder Edison North, the newly-selected Terran Representative to the Galactic Federation Council. According to the reports of our representative Merik Ryson and other sources, Earth had made the decision to send a representative to the Council just before their present Isolationist government gained power.

"I might emphasise that the Isolationist group has as its driving force a small, solid core, which our investigations have shown to be linked with a group of industrial and transport corporations called World Holdings. This combine has gained a virtual monopoly in many fields of transportation and heavy construction on Earth, and has begun strong opposition to Earth's proposed link-up with the Federation to protect its own position."

"That's a deliberate lie!" Adams jerked his head back, his eyes wild.

"We'll see," Breon's voice was cool. "There is an election to be held soon on Earth—an election in which the Isolationist Party could easily be put out of office after holding it for just one term. They have spread the idea that life in the Federation outside Earth is violent and dangerous. Technical barbarism—that was one of the favourite phrases they have used.

"When the time arrived to select a representative to send to the Council's Mid-Year Assembly, our investigators' suspicions were aroused by their choice of Edison North—their bitterest opponent. The suspicions were valid. The group—of which this man Adams is a member—planned to have North assassinated in Morak, on his way here, using a Xarian heat-pistol to throw the blame on to the Federation. We have recovered the pistol—it was one of several stolen from a Xarian outpost forty years ago.

"A press campaign has already been planned on Earth to make the greatest possible capital of the fact that their Representative was murdered by the Federation."

Adams sprang to his feet. "This is absurd! There's not an atom of evidence to back it."

"There is," Breon's tone was calm and definite.

"Where?"

"In your mind."

Adams looked sharply at the three telepaths. "This mind-reading stuff proves nothing."

"Not directly. But we're getting a relay of the thoughts that are bothering you. I'll give you an example. You came to Morak with papers showing you to be an agent of the Terran-Procyon Trading Company. You are worried by the fact that no such organization has existed for years. Correct?"

"No!"

Breon turned to Ryson. "You have the microfilm copies of Earth directories? Good." He looked piercingly at Adams again. "Tell us the address of that firm."

Adams' tongue passed snake-like across his dry lips. "All right. So I used the name of a defunct company to make it easier for me to contact people. That's done every day."

Breon seemed to look right through him. "Then there's the matter of the heat-pistols, taken forty years ago from a Xarian base on a planet where World Holdings was also doing mineral prospecting."

Adams looked at the three telepaths, then at the watching figures on the screens. "What I think—that proves nothing!" he shouted.

North started slightly as a voice came from the first of the screens which had lit up. One of the men at the long table spoke to Breon as if he were in the same room.

"There's a point, here. I take it you want to distribute the record of these proceeding on some planets where telepathy is barely accepted?"

Breon nodded, and signalled to Ryson. "I want you to show one of those films you took with the micro-televisor." He took a sheet of paper from a file on his desk and consulted it. "Number K 43."

While Ryson was fitting a reel to the projector, Breon turned again to the screen. "We have some other evidence here. Remember, as you watch this, that Earth is theoretically as much a democracy as Xaron. However, our investigator has succeeded in tracing the central source-points of Isolationist policy."

"Might I ask how?" demanded the man at the long table.

"By a remote-controlled micro-television unit with a microscopic antigrav—the entire unit is hardly larger than a fair-sized insect. We have many films taken in this way, but for the present this reel should suffice." Breon nodded to Ryson, and dimmed the light in the room by darkening the polarised windows.

Ryson bent over the projector, and a picture flashed on the wall opposite the vision-screens. It was two-dimensional, black and white, with the distortion of a wide-angle lens, but it was recognisable as a view taken from the dark upper corner of a room, showing a number of men seated about a table. Adams, on the left of the man who appeared to be presiding, was unmistakable. He was speaking.

"I have contacts in Morak. They could put me in touch with some local jerk who would do the job. Let me have a few of those Xarian guns."

The chairman looked at one of the others. "Give him a couple of the guns. Give him anything he needs. We can't afford to slip on this."

"I don't like it," came a protest. "With the election coming up, it's risky."

"With the election ahead, we just have to take the chance," asserted the chairman. "I want to congratulate you, Adams. Brilliant. We would have taken a risk, anyway, in altering the ballot to exclude North. This way, the risk is much less."

"Except to Edison North," put in one of the others. There was a chorus of laughter around the table.

"Except to Edison North," echoed the chairman.

Breon signalled to Ryson, who switched off the projector. The room was again flooded with light. Adams, slumped in his chair, looked ghastly.

"Have you anything to say?" Breon asked him.

He shook his head. Breon said nothing, his eyes unwavering. Adams looked out the window at the geometric mountains of the capital's buildings, and the breath went out of him in a shuddering sigh. "You can't blame all this on me. I was only carrying out orders." Suddenly he sat more erect, his mouth twisting sideways.

"Look! There's nothing you can legally do to me, here. So I arranged to have an Earthman shot. That was in Morak! You can't punish me for anything that happened there."

Breon shook his head. "We have no intention of punishing you. We're shipping you back to Earth—after we have sent the complete records of this enquiry there, as well as all over the Federation."

"But you can't do that. They'll kill me!" Adams looked about him, and his gaze fell on North. "Do something about this! If I'm sent back to Earth, they'll kill me there!"

Into North's mind came a vivid picture of the Security Headquarters in Morak. He felt cold anger.

"Very likely," he said. "Better keep your eyes open."

"It should be obvious by now," said Breon, "that the Isolationist group on Earth is riding the tiger."

"Riding the tiger?" Adams looked at him blankly. "I don't follow."

Breon shrugged. "I believe that expression came from an old Earth proverb. I thought you would have known it: *Who rides the tiger may never dismount.*

"You can see what I mean. In the face of steady advance in human techniques, with Earth lagging behind, your small group has tried to protect its own interests by building up on Earth a mistrust of all human civilization outside.

"To keep this mistrust alive, you have had to inflame it into outright fear and hatred. When North threatened to dispel this fear and hatred, you had to go as far as attempting murder."

Adams opened his mouth, but said nothing.

"Can you see this?" Breon leaned forward, fist striking the desk. "Suppose you had killed him, blaming the Federation. *What then?* Would that have been the final answer?" He shook his head.

"You would have had still more tension to deal with. Still more hatred, more fear. Your next move would have needed yet more violence. For the tiger always grows.

"It would have gone on and on. And you could never dismount.

"*Can you see this?*"

North suddenly realised that Breon was not talking to Adams alone. This speech would be heard all over the Federation.

When the meeting had been closed, and the last of the wall-screens had flicked into blankness, he walked across to Breon's desk.

"Could I send copies of the films of this interview to my Party on Earth? With the election almost due, there would be no need for any further action."

Breon glanced briefly at the three telepaths before he replied.

"Certainly." His voice was as calm as it would have been if North had asked him to tell him the time.

On the wall was the Galactic Federation flag, turquoise, with the golden figure of a man bearing a torch, leaping upward to the stars, symbol of Man's onward and upward flight. North glanced up at it.

Just for a moment, that phrase about riding the tiger flicked through his mind with a different meaning.

—Wynne N. Whiteford

Kenneth Bulmer is one of London's most popular science fiction writers and can always be relied upon to present an interesting and exciting plot. Long a devotee of the genre he started writing in the medium in 1949 and finally turned to professional writing in 1956, since when innumerable short stories and novels have appeared under his own name and several pseudonyms.

THE HALTING HAND

by KENNETH BULMER

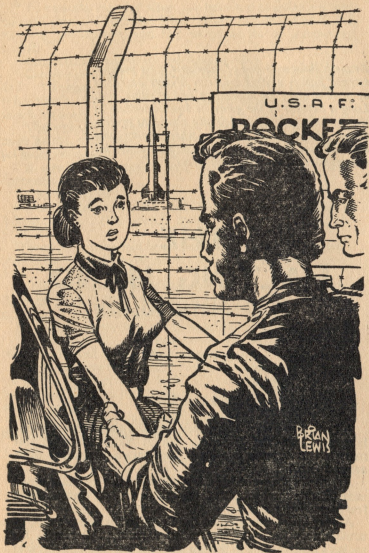
Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter One

A two stage rocket eighty feet long and weighing sixty tons laboured from the launching pad at Vandenburg. It just managed to squeeze five black mice into a temporary orbit around Earth.

A lunar probe weighing a few pounds was eventually aimed near enough the Moon to orbit and return. It transmitted a few blotchy pictures.

A very brave man girdled the Earth half a dozen times, in acute discomfort, and was fished from the Atlantic in his rocket's nose capsule in the last stages of nervous and physical exhaustion, nearly dead.



The Earth's newspapers, summing all this up, gave their considered opinion. A single headline suffices.

"Man Conquers Outer Space."

Fetras Vinter, who had just travelled aboard a two mile long spaceship from a solar system on the Galactic Rim to his home planet of Caerlongue, looked at the messy black type and coarse, crumbling paper with amused yet awed interest.

"But Outer Space lies outside the Galaxy," he said.

His departmental chief clucked disapprovingly. "You should know by now, Fetras, that any young civilisation regards the area across the way—be it jungle, ocean or space—as the farther bounds of the known." He flicked for the window shade and the polarised plastic cut down yet further the amount of sunshine streaming in. Laskin, departmental chief of C.G.A.B. never had liked sunshine, Fetras Vinter recalled, and went on listening impatiently, the stupid newspaper of a stupid race clutched in his hands. This whole interview was stupid, everyone knew that, and if Vinter didn't escape from this stupid assignment-talk in a few seconds he'd—he'd—well, what could he do?

Laskin was speaking in his precise, bird-like way. "All I can tell you, Fetras, is that you'll be working on this planet. I know you've only just returned from the Rim; but the war situation is serious. We inflicted severe losses on the Terentii"—there was the familiar and universal loathing in his voice as he spoke that name—"in a series of space battles that covered a few parsecs and destroyed a few thousand vessels, but—"

He had no need to go on blabbing along this sidetrack, Vinter knew. Laskin liked the sound of his own voice. And when Vinter, having been told that he was to report to Central Assignments, knew what he had to do next, then the mere sound of Laskin was enough to make him writhe. He tried to be diplomatic.

"I know the war isn't going too well. But I don't suppose this planet I'll be working on has any bearing on the war situation. I'd better get along to Central Assignments—"

"In a hurry, Fetras?"

Vinter calmed himself. His hands were not trembling; he was too good an undercover agent for that; but he felt as though he could not stand another second's delay.

"I've just made planetfall on Caerlongue. I reported to you straightaway. That was my duty. But—but my report on marriage status awaits me at Central Registry. I'm—"

"I understand!" Laskin's birdy voice thickened. "Well, I hope the report is all you expect."

"May I leave now?"

"Of course, of course." Laskin stood up. "Well, I don't suppose I'll see you again till you return from—where was it—Earth, that's right. I suppose you'll be thinking of getting married then?"

"Yes. Yes, as soon as this assignment is over, I'll be getting married."

Laskin frowned playfully. Vinter remained calm. "You may not, Fetras, be regarded so highly as an undercover agent for C.G.A.B. when you're a married man."

"I'll worry about that when it happens."

"Yes, I'm sure you will. Goodbye, Fetras. Keep your nose clean on, where was it—Earth, that's right. Goodbye."

Fetras Vinter walked at his normal smart pace from the office, caught the neg-grav shaft to the sixtieth level below and then raced like a madman—or a man in love—along between startled businessmen and secretaries and military officials until he could cross to the fortieth level below and so make his way, flushed and anxious, to Central Registry. Around him the planet-wide city throbbed with purpose and energy, dedicated to one object in life—the total and final destruction of the Terentii. At this moment to Vinter, a lifetime's indoctrination was no handicap at all to forgetting the Terentii, the war and everything that went with it. He could think of nothing but the report on himself and Eva he was about to receive.

Central Registry was a mammoth building among mammoths. The lower levels—below thirtieth—were rarely visited by anyone apart from maintenance men and those who lived there in perpetual twilight tending the machines. The upper tiers soared into the sunlight. Vinter found his appropriate entrance, designated by sex, age, profession, residence, and found his initialled cubicle, one among thousands. Moving stripways carried throngs of people, happy, miserable, expectant, from entrance to entrance in a continuous and seemingly haphazard flow. He sent in his record card and was told by the robot attendant to wait.

The opportunity was too good to miss. He found a pay telebooth and dialled Eva's hospital. The matron to whom he eventually spoke, after unaccountable delay, was polite, distant, and completely unhelpful. Miss Eva Surendra had left

the hospital some months ago to continue nursing aboard a hospital ship. As far as the matron knew, Miss Surendra was now in space, somewhere beyond the Karlin sector. Messages? Yes, there had been a tape left for a Fentras Vinter and this had been passed to Central Registry.

Vinter cut the connection. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply. His perceptive powers, heightened far beyond Caerlongue normal by his work, had picked up nothing from the matron. He had tried; whereas in normal life perceptive powers were kept latent in day-to-day contacts, between friends and lovers the power of perceiving another person's emotions gave a richer texture to relationships, heightened pleasures. He had received nothing from the matron. Alarm kindled in him. Eva had joined a hospital ship! But why? They were to be married—*were* to? He caught himself thinking in the past tense, and the shock of that sobered him up.

Back at Central Registry the robot handed out judgment.

There was never any possibility of picking up emotions from a robot.

What the robot was saying, dryly, mechanically, was typed rapidly out on a card which clicked, finally, into the slot ready for Vinter to pick it up. But he sat, still and silent, staring unseeingly at the smooth plastic and metal of the robot cubicle. So that was why Eva had joined the Space Medical Service and fled across space and into battle.

"No," the robot had told him. "No. You and Miss Eva Surendra may not marry." And the eugenics of the thing had followed, all neatly typed out in impeccable dark green on pale green. Vinter felt sick. He rose, the sweat dry and chill on his forehead, and stumbled out of the booth, out of Central Registry, out—out . . .

He remembered Sharli and his girl. All their friends had predicted a whirlwind courtship, quick permission from Central Registry—the couple were so obviously *right*—and a happy marriage. He could still feel the spurting ache that hit him when Central Registry had said: "No." But Sharli and his girl had accepted at once, meekly, matter-of-factly. Oh, sure, they'd been disappointed; but nothing more. They'd gone off quite amicably to find fresh partners. Even then, Vinter had wondered at their chameleon-like feelings.

Now he knew that, having it happen to him, his own feelings couldn't adjust—at least, not yet, not easily.

He walked along the slipways without looking, letting the sights and sounds and scents of the city assault him, and bypassing them without conscious volition. The tape from Eva, handed to him by the robot as he left, dragged in the pocket of his short coat. His legs, in fashionable black tights, still felt shaky and watery. He'd have to brace up before he went onto Central Assignments. He found that he didn't care a jot about their new job for him, about Earth, about a tuppenny-ha'penny little backwoods planet that thought it had conquered space by paddling out to its own satellite . . .

They hadn't even done that, he remembered, suddenly, with a bitter, hurtful laugh. But, then, perhaps they didn't have Central Registrations that told you who you could marry and who you couldn't, either . . .

By the time he reported in he had himself under control. That he should feel the way he did must, he considered, by Caerlongue standards, be quite normal. In a day or two he would be feeling better, more like his old self. His was no unusual case—and he was no out-of-the ordinary specimen of Caerlongue manhood. But Eva . . . He fought that down and reported in.

The robot's multifaceted eyes regarded him gravely—a deliberate illusion. Vinter sat down on the comfortably padded bench, pulled out the bundle of coarse and primitive newspapers from Earth, and settled himself to listen.

The machine would do everything. It would give him the language—or languages if they were *that* primitive—the mores, customs, background, history ; in toto, fit him to act the part—rather—to be, an Earthman.

So Vinter thought. The robot told him the first snag.

"This planet has achieved the first glimmerings of space flight, using chemical rockets, in advance of its own social organisation. The planet is an illogical mess of conflicting ideas, languages, customs—in toto, as you might expect us to brief you—we cannot fit you for life universally on Earth."

Vinter knew better than to interrupt.

The robot went on tonelessly : "There are two main blocs, each struggling in any way possible against the other. Their attempts to reach space flight stem from this conflict ; not from the intrinsic value of reaching other intelligences than them-

selves. They fear many things. A colleague—Cottell Surendra—is being assigned a task on Earth. He will be briefed to take care of one bloc ; you will handle the other.”

Eva’s brother ! Assigned to work with him ! This made nonsense of random selection—and then Vinter wondered, as he had wondered before, if Central Control, deciding what should be done for the good of every individual on Caerlongue and her growing space federation, was quite so impersonal as people thought. But, it must be. A machine must be impersonal—and the people of Caerlongue’s space federation wanted it that way. They knew how to handle the machines that handled their lives.

The robot went on to brief him on what was known of Earth. It was precious little. So vast was the complex of the Caerlongue space federation, so widespread and bitter the conflict with the Terentii, that small off-trail worlds could only be glanced at briefly in the survey trip of one expedition. Had things been different—had their hands not been fettered by the galactic war—then the men of Caerlongue could have welcomed the men of Earth in fitting style. As it was . . .

“Your task, Fetras Vinter, is to prevent the natives of Earth from getting into space.”

Vinter accepted that. He didn’t care about Earth. He had a job to do there. When it was done, then he could see about fixing up his life again, putting it back on the rails.

“I understand that Cottell Surendra—” he began.

“You will have little opportunity of contact, at least, physically.” There was nothing in the robot’s tone, of course ; yet even in his despondency, Vinter felt the familiar little prickle of superiority over a mere machine—the machines had never comprehended the immaterial functions of the human mind. The robot went on briskly : “His area of assignment is of the order of ten thousand miles from you. He will be briefed for one bloc’s languages and ideas ; you the other. We see no need for duplication of effort. Even now, as you know, both of you can barely be spared for a job which should be one individual’s. Do not permanently cripple their will to space. Just prevent them from achieving success, even within their own solar system, for a time period at least of fifty of their years.”

“I notice they are humanoid, from their newspapers. How close are they to humanity ?”

"They are human. It is believed that they belong to a remnant of a distant exploratory party from the human section of the galaxy. They are nothing like the Terentii. They and you cannot be told apart because there is no difference. They have pigmentation differentiation and some races have evolved along slightly different physical lines—all this is in the records—there must have been a variegated crew aboard that old spaceship. You have no fear of discovery on that score."

"That's one thing to be thankful for." Vinter then received the rest of the briefing, took the language—English—and had the foresight to ask for two other important languages.

Chapter Two

His lack of enthusiasm for this job was in startling contrast to his usual bubbling effervescence when starting on a mission. He thought he'd get over it. The sensation was odd and most disagreeable. He made his preparations, packed and then, forcing himself, played Eva's tape.

There was in the short, pathetic message, nothing more nor less than he expected. Eva had received the report, been unable to contact him, away on an alien planet on the Rim, and had, she said, to give herself time to get over it all, volunteered for nursing duty aboard a hospital ship with the Fleet. The words that meant anything were those short, simple and so damnably logical words : "To get over it."

They meant, of course, that Eva accepted completely the dictates of Central Registry. Her background and training and understanding of life could not allow her to comprehend anything other than that ; Vinter couldn't see why he should feel the way he did. Probably, if he and Eva had married their children would be unnatural ; certainly they would be eugenically unsound.

He pushed the tape down amongst his clothes, snapped the magnecatches shut on his travelling case and then, in devilish mood, teleported the case across the room to the door. He felt the same, sure strength flowing from his mind, and that was a comfort. Emotions were being bred out of his people ; everyone knew that and didn't seem to care overmuch about it ; and, right now, the worries of other people meant nothing to him at all—but it was good to feel the power meshing smoothly and purposefully in his own mind ! Good !

That feeling of reliance in his own mental powers was still with him as he took the last stage of the journey to the planet of assignment, and he playfully tumbled the airlock seals without touching them, much to the navy lieutenant's chagrin. People with telekinetic powers kept them decently under control as everyone did with their powers of empathy.

The navy lieutenant said: "Your ship is a four-place scout, standard drive and flux procedure. I've been asked to confirm with you that—"

"I can handle the type, thanks," Vinter said. "And the quicker I'm bringing her back from this Earth into civilisation again, the better."

The lieutenant laughed. Vinter walked through the lock, and this time he smiled as he freed the seals on the small four-place spaceship in the lock.

"You're good," the lieutenant said.

"Sometimes I have to be."

"Would you advise me to apply for an appointment with C.G.A.B.?" The lieutenant glanced at the spaceship's airlock and the seals closed promptly.

Vinter, welcoming the clash, twitched the seals open. As they began to close again under the power of telekinetic command flowing from the lieutenant's brain, Vinter applied more power. The seals hovered, half open. They quivered. Then, slowly, they opened wider and wider until, finally, they clanged back. The airlock remained open.

The navy lieutenant was sweating.

"Good," he said breathlessly. "Damn good."

"If you joined C.G.A.B. you'd lead a dog's life," Vinter went on as though nothing had happened. "Hopping from one planet to the next, doing your job, then getting a fresh one from Central Assignments. There is too much work for us all—you'd be welcome."

"C.G.A.B.," the lieutenant said, enquiringly. "No one seems rightly to know what—"

"Caerlongue Galactic Adjustment Bureau. We push and pull the buttons and levers of the galaxy—at least, the part of it that the Terentii do not control." And, as usual, mention of the Terentii effectively dampened the humour of the conversation. Vinter stepped aboard the little spaceship and sent her sweeping away, out, fast, towards Earth.

There was no problem making planetfall. His anti-detection gear brought him through brushing fingers of primitive radar without alarm and he settled down at the given co-ordinates. The spaceship plunged beneath the Pacific ten miles off the Californian coastline, grounded under pressure that but for her eternally humming machinery would have mashed her flat and remained quiescent and waiting for the signal that would bring her back to the surface. Vinter, dropping on a neg-grav pack into the desert scrub bordering the white and dusty highway, sighed.

Another one had begun.

Procedure was automatic and routine. He buried the pack and a kit of tools, checked the location mentally, then began to walk in the unfamiliar pseudo-Earth clothes towards the highway. Six hours later he was in a town called Las Vegas. Central Registry had been as explicit as the information it had allowed it and Vinter had no trouble understanding the theory behind the acquisition of genuine native exchange tokens for his future livelihood ; trouble was, he found out in a hurry, the natives had a strongly marked suspicion inherent in their character. His first manipulations of the childish machines with which they amused themselves resulted in dark looks, many keys, much unlocking and checking and, finally, the grudging handing over of silver coins.

He deemed it prudent to move from one garish and vulgar establishment to the next, winning steadily. As a trained galactic member of C.G.A.B. he anticipated no difficulty in obtaining what he wanted from these people in the way of comfort, food and transportation. He just hadn't expected the dull and suspicious way they played games here.

Moving onto quicker methods of winning, involving the fall of dice, which was galactically universal, he built up what appeared to be a tidy sum. Then he sought out the best means of transport to the coast and, avoiding Los Angeles, went through Barstow, Mojave and Bakersfield until he reached by a small detour Santa Barbara ; here he holed up in a hotel.

Just north lay Vandenburg Air Force Base, and his task was now to enter the site. He was beginning to realise, from what he read avidly in the bulky newspapers and heard over the radio, that his task was not going to be easy. Sitting back on the bed, with the air conditioning humming excruciatingly he came to the unwelcome conclusion that it was, with the time

at his disposal, impossible. That meant, therefore, that he must find some other way to accomplish his mission.

Moving along the coast, edging northwards, staying a night here, a couple of days there, he realised that this whole area fell into a caste system that he saw might solve one problem. A great deal of sunbathing, swimming and general lazing about the beaches went on in the sunshine, and he soon familiarised himself with the haunts of the technicians and scientists let out on an invisible but potent leash from the missile test centre. He spent a month acquiring a tan, with a wry chuckle at thought of Laskin polarising the windows, lazing about and fitting himself into the background. Had he been anyone other than what he was, he would have revelled in the holiday.

There had never been any real interest for him in drinking alcohol ; but he conformed in this, as in everything else, and he was quick to notice the relaxation that went on in garish nightclubs. Now he needed an in—and he was set.

He was standing on the top board, ready to plunge out and down into the too-blue water of the bathing pool, when Eva strolled onto the patio of the motel and stood regarding the water expectantly. The shock was so great that he lost his balance and fell.

He hit the water spine first, sent up an enormous shell-shaped fan of spray and then was gasping and struggling to the side. His hands hit the cork edging and he glared upwards through wet hair. She was standing less than three yards away, staring at him, laughing at him.

Her fine golden hair clustered in bubbles around her neck. The mellow tan of arms and legs showed warm and exciting against the straight, simple lines of her white pleated nylon dress. She looked delectable.

It wasn't Eva.

"Do you win many prizes?" she asked sweetly.

"Huh?" said Vinter. The rushing thrum of blood in his head ached now like the last of the wine ; he felt empty, deflated, beaten.

"I mean, your diving style is quite revolutionary."

Vinter caught on. And in the catching, with this native Earth girl's heart-breaking resemblance to Eva, he felt a shocking squall take all his emotions and shake him as the dogs of this planet shook small animals in their mouths. His back stung painfully and he guessed it was red with the water-

beating. But that was forgotten as he handed himself up and out of the pool. Water ran down his body.

"It's a new technique," he said, smiling. "Would you care to learn?"

Then she laughed. And that sank Vinter, once and for all.

Later that evening, when the stars were fatly shining above, they sat at a small table beneath an arbour of sweet-scented blooms, completely absorbed in each other. She could never know those stars above as Vinter knew them. To her, they were merely dots that twinkled in the sky. To Vinter, they were places where he visited, planets of memory, satellites where he had worked; the whole heavens—the whole heavens left them by the Terentii—was a three-dimensional place to live to Vinter.

To the girl—to Tess Lichtenbaum—the stars were a mere two-dimensional roof.

And that was where Vinter made a mistake.

Tessa was a technologist working on large scale rocket guidance systems—just another worker on any one of the multifarious space projects currently going on—and beyond that she offered no information. Security was more than just a name to these people, Vinter saw, and wondered how Cottell Surendra was making out on the other side of the fence. Then he began to pick up some of the convictions this girl radiated as a trait of personality, so deeply were they ingrained in her character.

As they sat and chatted about supremely important nothings, and Vinter elaborated his fictitious background and used all his psychological training to keep one jump ahead of her questions, he allowed his perceptive faculties to tell him more of Tessa. There was no shame in that. He was on an assignment.

What he found bewildered him. Everything so far on this backward planet called Earth pointed to two power-mad blocs struggling for space in order to be the first there, to be in a position to smash the other power at will. Yet here was this slip of a girl filled with ideas of interplanetary travel and exploration for the sheer doing of it, for the wonder, the freedom, the outward urge of a vital race; filled with all the very reasons for space travel that were found in normal healthy races on planets of far higher cultural development than this jungle world.

"When I think," Tessa said, "that in my lifetime we shall see what the other side of the Moon is like, that we shall solve the secret of the Martian canals, that we shall peer beneath the cloak of Venus—I get so choked up, I—well, this must sound goshawful weepy to you—stupid—all out of proportion, especially for a woman—"

"There are a lot of people around here who feel like that," Vinter said. He made the question a statement.

"Around here, especially. And around Canaveral. Places like that. We're not all blood and guts, you know."

"No. I know."

"It's like reading about a Christmas party all your childhood, and then, when you're twenty-one, you go to your first ball—and—and, well all this is out of fashion now, not sophisticated and slick and sixtyish. But that's the way most of us feel."

"You're absolutely sure you'll succeed?"

"Of course! I'm not telling you anything of what we're doing. Naturally. But we'll get there, don't worry."

Vinter sipped his drink. This was no complication. No thoughts of any girl, however much like his lost Eva she might be, could for one instant stand in the way of his job. There were always the Terentii to think of, prowling the dark wastes between the stars, ready to pounce and destroy.

But it made his assignment just that much more unpleasant.

Stopping a race launching itself into space wasn't a particularly nice thought, now he had seen it in a different light; but it had meant nothing to him until faced with its undoubted effects on the life and feelings of just one person, on the happiness of Tessa, sitting across the table from him now, laughing at him, light in her eyes. He smiled back, and the warmth in their glances promised many things.

Consciously bringing himself back to the matter in hand, Vinter said: "A lot of people object to spending the enormous sums of money we do on these rockets of yours, Tessa."

"Then let them stop spending it on bombs and bombers, tanks and guns. Seems logical."

"Too logical." Vinter spoke without bitterness; he had learned his part, and knew that he was more on centre than Tessa. She was not talking, now, like the average inhabitant of this continent. "But if there are many more failures like Vanguard, then the money will tend to throttle down . . ."

"Nope." Tessa shook her golden curls. "No sirree. We are going out to have a looksee at those lovely stars up there, and a few failures at the beginning won't stop us."

"Umm," said Vinter.

For the very first time the realisation that he was one man alone on this continent and the scope of what he had been assigned by a machine to do struck him with a tremor of—not of unease, of doubt—but of amused interest at the problems involved. There was not a single fibre of doubt or fear in him on this question.

He saw Tessa safely into her vacation hotel, genuine regret softening him when he learned she was returning to the rocket site the following day. She was offhand ; but Vinter's perceptions picked up all he wanted to know. He said goodnight without undue emotional overtones, choked up a bit when an unwanted flash of Eva blinded his inner vision, and went back to his own hotel. He had man's work to do.

Chapter Three

Locals were accustomed to foreigners striding into their countryside, bringing in dollars, excitement, brash living, and then vanishing. Camp Cooke during the war and the Korean war had mushroomed. The town of Lompoc, even after a few years of missilemen crowding their streets, still waited for the big write-off. Vinter, knowing this, felt pleased that someone wouldn't be surprised at the fifty-year lay-off in space research he had to force through.

He bought a car and camping equipment and, avoiding the town and the acres of seed farms around, drove fast northwards until he reckoned that, working from the land, he was as far from the habitations as he could be. He pitched camp and began uncrating the radio spare parts that had taken him the best part of a week to assemble. A golden rule—always use artifacts of the planet you're working on. If anything is discovered, you're just a genius stemming from the native stock ; nothing must point to your being a man from the stars.

Vinter began to construct his interference emitter. Then he sensed carefully out, letting feelings and perceptions pour into his mind. Excitement. Tension. Fear of failure. Nervousness. Most of all, he sensed, a bubbling hatred of failure in the minds of those men and women just over the horizon, working

on their slim streamlined silver fish. Vinter mentally examined the rocket. A primitive example ; but one which could fling an instrumented satellite around Mars.

There was no pity in him, no feelings of any sort, as he reached out with his mind and telekined a valve shut. At this distance he could shift only smallish items ; but a rocket was many hundreds of thousands of small items, and any one could wreck the whole, especially when he sabotaged the safeties into the bargain. He had waited until the moment before takeoff, the moment when the count-down was unstoppable.

The rocket rose from the pad. For a second, she rose slowly, on her eiderdown of fire—and then she tilted, broke up, fell and vanished into radiance that seared green-protected eyes. And Vinter felt nothing—allowed himself to feel nothing.

He buried his gadget in the soil by an eucalyptus tree and struck camp. Should any more rockets of that type be fired from that pad, the gadget would repeat the valve-jamming operation he had just performed. Now he had to find all the other launching pads and lock a gadget onto them. The job shouldn't take too long. The natives of Earth were so new in the spaceship building game their yards and launching facilities could be covered by a single man without strain.

Nowhere on this planet could be regarded by Vinter as home so that his movements about the continent meant merely haphazard wanderings. Yet, despite his lack of roots, he found himself calculating where he was in relation to the motel where he had met Tessa. He felt all the more cut off when he took a side trip to Cape Canaveral and spent a week or so sabotaging various shoots. By this time the news that something was very much amiss with the nation's space programme was leaking out into the fiery-worded Press.

Vinter eased off. After all, knocking down rockets on takeoff was child's play to a man who could reach into the rocket with his mind and perform any one of innumerable tiny actions. He had to brake the natives of Earth ; he didn't have to smash their will-to-space for good and all.

He went back to the West Coast, to the same motel, and long before his car pulled in he had sensed the radiations from Tessa. Useless to send anything back. Useless to send his feelings for her, his sympathy, his reassurances, his . . . Tessa was perceptively blind, like all the aliens on this planet.

That was a loss ; but, perversely, it made his feelings for her all the stronger.

That evening they sat again under the same flower-covered arbour ; but this time the strain, the tenseness, the worry in Tessa made of her a different woman. She was again on leave, and, with the crumpled newspaper spread on the table between them, there was no secret why.

"Everything in the space research programme is going wrong," Tessa said. She was taking it very badly. It was a personal thing with her, a private dream that was being smeared by the unwelcome fingers of the mundane day.

"Things will get better," said Vinter.

"Will they ? I can't talk to you about it. Quite apart from maximum security and all that, you wouldn't understand."

"You should know better than that, Tessa."

"I'm sorry." She reached across the table, touched his hand. "I'm upset. Silly, isn't it ? Stupid of me to think it was all going to be easy." She forced a smile that wrenched at Vinter. "But I did want to step down onto the Moon."

"You could . . ." Vinter said, unwarily, the sentiment slipping betrayingly from his lips.

She laughed, without amusement. "Oh, sure. I could. But the way things are going, will I ? I doubt it."

Vinter had heard nothing from Cottell. But he had read the reports in the newspapers and knew that space research wasn't going as scheduled where Cottell was working. No news from those quarters, it seemed, meant that setbacks had arisen. They invariably reported success with loud cries of triumph ; failures were ignored, unlike the people of Tessa's race.

Tessa invited him to a beach party the next day. A gang of scientists and techs were on leave and the avowed intention was to forget mass-ratio and exhaust velocities and the percentage reliability of a component in an assembly. The white and golden sands, the blue sea and sky, these were the facts of life that mattered.

No one really enjoyed it all. Thoughts stayed obstinately with the inexplicable foul-ups on the pads.

When the others had accepted Vinter as a young man who knew nothing about rockets, cared less, and was of the conforming type, they were less careful about talking shop before him amongst themselves. They couldn't keep their lips

buttoned, as they phrased it, with the burning sensations of frustration splitting their skulls.

Lying on the sand, Vinter heard three of them hammering away at the old arguments. Two were large, blonde-haired, lazily tenacious types ; the other was shorter, darker-skinned with buck teeth and a smile that never failed. Vinter took little notice of them, watching Tessa throwing a beach-ball about with a ferocious attempt to oust her blues in physical energy. These people took the set-back so *personally*.

The beach-ball struck his ankles and he reached up and down and shoved it back. One of the blonde-haired scientists glanced up. He sprang to his feet, chased the ball.

"Come on Ed ! And you, you lazy layabout, Mitsu ! Let's get with this game." They all ran off, laughing.

The laughter rang cold on the warm sea breeze.

Back on Caerlongue people laughed, too. When a robot slipped up, as they sometimes though rarely did, and pulled a dumb-bunny act, people laughed. They had canned amusement, and they laughed. But Vinter had never heard a race laugh in quite the same way as these primitives from Earth laughed. And he was turning that laughter among Tessa's friends into the bitter mockery he was hearing now.

That laughter slowed and stopped over the next few months as Vinter applied carefully calculated pressure on the nation's space research programme. Once in that period Cottell Surendra contacted him and once he flew across and looked at the work going on around the Caspian Sea. Alone, they conversed in their own tongue ; in public they found Chinese was the only mutual language of this planet they shared with competence. At least, Central Registry had had the foresight to teach them the same brand of Chinese. And the laughter, around the world, changed subtly.

Those who believed in the right of spatial exploration and chafed and grew bitter over the delays and the failures found laughter difficult. Those who opposed it on grounds that other more important things came first found a growing resentment that spatial exploration was being denied them not through any grand renunciation on their part. The zanies who didn't know or care still laughed ; but their laughter was still as hedonistically meaningless now as it always had been.

Vinter blew into the motel again one fall day and checked that Tessa was not around. He knew better than to try to ring

her at the rocket research base and so when he bumped into the blonde Ed and his pal Mitsu, he welcomed them with the intention of asking after Tessa.

"Tessa? Sure, she's working right now." Ed called for drinks. "Pity she's taking this situation so personally."

"I thought you all did that."

"Yes." Mitsu smiled. "We all do. But some chafe more than others. It gets them that way."

Vinter allowed his perceptions to fan out. These two were excited. Something obscure motivated that; something to do with rockets, something that he ought to know about. He raised his glass.

"Here's hoping the next bird will be the successful one," he said.

"It will be," Ed growled, and drank.

Mitsu coughed and spoke quickly. "We hope that all the time, Mr. Vinter. All the time."

Vinter took assurance from them that Tessa would be out on a short leave the next day, and, after a few more drinks and desultory conversation, the group broke up. Vinter headed for his motel room. He had another task on his mind.

So far no one of Caerlongue—or any other planet known to him—had broken through the barrier to telepathy and their best so far was the empathy, the sensing of emotions and feelings, which he used as a matter of course. He was wishing for practical mental communication as he hooked up his radio rig, triggered it through to the buried spaceship under its tons of water, and fired off his messages by ultra-radio across the parsecs of empty space. Central Registry was cold, machinelike, brisk.

"Your assignment remains unchanged."

"I've been cut off from news—" Vinter began.

The robot interrupted. "The war is going badly. The Terentii have broken through our outlying defence screens. But we have mounted a counter-offensive and are holding them back. Computer prognostications indicate an eighty-twenty chance of complete annihilation for this arm of the enemy fleet."

"Umm," said Vinter.

He broke the connection, telekined a cigarette from its pack and lit up. The Earthly vice had its compensations.

An airmail letter awaited him the next morning. Cottell was in Rome and was on his way to see him. Vinter did not feel prepared to leave the vicinity of Vandenburg just now. From what the two rocket scientists had let slip he knew that another shoot was in the wind ; he sensed it was an important one, one that, perhaps, would decide the whole future of space research. And, anyway, Tessa would be out to see him.

The way in which the circumstances followed, Vinter might have worried about the hand of fate, if he hadn't known better. He was sitting on the patio, idly reading, his thoughts turned in on himself, when Cottell came walking across. He looked up, smiling, and the two men walked together to a private table set behind a wooden screen.

"I thought you were in Rome, Cottell?"

"So I was. But I had to see you fast. I think I've reached the point where these people are ready to quit."

A waiter moved past. They ignored him. Vinter said : "We'd better talk Chinese. Just in case."

"Very well. How is it with you?"

"Much the same position. A shoot is due any time now. If I can trip that up, I think their enthusiasm will be blunted. We'll have to arrange the fifty years time limit later."

"Even though it took two of us, I think our assignment has been handled well enough. Two men, to stop a whole world from getting into space. Quite a trick, really."

"Oh, I don't know. Their rockets are childish toys, chemical fuels, and all that. We've had it all our own way."

Another voice, another voice speaking accented Chinese, said : "Up till now, you mean." Then, "Grab the other guy, Ed ! I'll take Vinter !" The last words in English.

Vinter started up, knocking his chair over. The little man called Mitsu was rushing upon him. He had a glimpse of the blonde giant Ed tackling Cottell—and of the white and frozen face of Tessa in the background.

Then the Japanese had him in some sort of body lock and was doing unpleasant things to him. Vinter used a trick he had picked up on the half-frozen world of a binary system out beyond Sirius, and Mitsu went sprawling across the table, to ram his head into the wooden trellis. Ed was staggering back, blood running from his nose. Cottell shouted, and leaped.

There was a brief, confused melee. Waiters were shouting and running. Mitsu lay on the patio, unconscious. Ed was just

toppling in an ungainly sprawl across him. Vinter said : " We'd better break for it, Cottell." He began to run across the patio, heading for his car. Cottell loped alongside.

Tessa stretched out a hand. Her eyes were very wide.

" I'm coming with you, Vin ! Wait for me !"

The three ran across the gravel, found Vinter's car, piled in and the auto was through the motel gate and away before the growing crowd had sorted out their dazed impressions.

Cottell Surendra choked out : " Eva !" Then he lay back, breathing hard and fingering the shiny bruise on his cheek bone where Ed's fist had caught him. " No. Not Eva. Not Eva."

" Why did you come, Tessa ? Why did you come ?"

" I don't know. It seemed the only thing to do." She was shaking now, and her lips were ridged in white. " Mitsu told us what you were saying. That you've been deliberately sabotaging our space research programme. And you were talking Chinese . . ."

Driving the car took little attention. Vinter clearly perceived the emotions storming at Tessa. Cottell caught them too and was uneasily shifting himself around. The three people in the front seat were like two pieces of Uranium two three five, hurtling towards each other—with an innocent bystander observing from the middle.

" We don't belong to the other side," Vinter said. He was talking English, which Cottell didn't understand. He said in his own tongue ; " I don't have to explain why this girl is mixed up in it. You yourself thought she was your sister. We have to be careful now. The assignment is nearly finished."

" I'll follow your lead, Petras."

Chapter Four

The car was travelling fast. Vinter headed out towards the open country, hoping to clear the seed farms and hit bare countryside where they could stop and plan. The girl sat with frozen, appalled face, her hands clenched over her bag. The wind was hot in their faces through the open windows.

" Look, Tessa," Vinter said. " I don't know what you say Mitsu thought he heard. We were just discussing—"

" Save it." Tessa spoke evenly. " Save it for the FBI."

" There's no need to be melodramatic about a simple brawl in a motel, Tessa," Vinter said, still trying. " You ought to know that Mitsu is insane with jealousy."

"Now who's being melodramatic? And, anyway, you ought to know about race relationships. How come?"

Tessa stopped speaking. From her feverish brain Vinter picked up a mounting, giddy, whirling fear that he recognised all too clearly. He felt, suddenly, a protective passion for this girl that amazed him. What Central Registry would have to say, he daren't think . . .

"I think," Cottell said calmly, "that we have broken the number one assignment rule."

"I agree." Vinter spoke heavily. "She thinks that we are not Earthpeople. Yet she cannot believe that. It's too big, too impossible, too incredible for her to grasp." He tried not to sound the way he felt. "Poor Tessa. Poor Tessa."

At the sound of her name the girl looked at him. Her eyes were enormous. She was gripping her lower lip between white teeth. Her chin was pumping up and down, despite that.

"Let me out," she said at last, the marks of her teeth in her lip white and sharp. "*Let me out!*"

Vinter pulled the car onto the shoulder. He did not stop but let the auto run on slowly. He sat solidly, blocking the door; Cottell sat equally as solidly on the other side of the girl. Vinter spoke with all the sincerity in him.

"Please listen, Tessa. First of all—I love you. Keep that in mind. I thought you were—another—girl at first. This man's sister. But she is aboard a hospital ship about a thousand or so light years from here."

"*So—you—are—!*"

"Yes, my dear. We are. But we don't look any different from Earthmen, do we?"

It was useless, right then, to go on speaking. Tessa, confronted with the unbelievable, sat rigid, unhearing, turned in on herself. Her hands slowly pulped her purse. Her eyes never left Vinter's face. And she swallowed continuously, her white throat working, working, working . . .

Some time later Vinter, holding her body close, felt that she would comprehend what he was saying. She had given a shuddering sigh of surrender when he had taken hold of her. Thereafter, she had not tried to pull away, had shown none of the expected hysterical hostility of a primitive for something she could not understand.

But then, Tessa *could* understand. Vinter held on to that belief stubbornly. This girl had talked to him of visiting the

Moon and the planets, had discussed alien life, had been able intellectually to grasp at the basic idea of the oneness of human life in the Galaxy. Her emotions had betrayed her into a natural horrified reaction. Now she was coming out of that shocked state, was beginning to realise the implications; she was letting her brain take over, and firmly filing her thalamus back with its outdated trees.

Once, a few moments ago, he thought she had said: "Don't touch me! You're not *human*!"

But now he knew that that instinctive, compulsive, wrenched out ejaculation had been purged by the saner stream of thought which now enabled her to look steadily at him, as though seeing him with fresh eyes and for the first time.

Which, strictly speaking, was true.

By the time they were all sitting smoking cigarettes—Cottell, too, had picked up the habit—plans of what followed next could be discussed calmly. It was, Vinter knew, a tremendous victory for this girl, a triumph of humanity over primal fears.

And—her feelings for him which he could plainly sense and which had not basically changed—thanks be!—steadied her, buttressed her convictions.

"And I suppose you have terrible and alien powers," Tessa said shakily. "You must have, to sabotage our space programme so effectively."

"Not terrible," Vinter said. "Just a little extra polish on powers you possess but have never used. It's not frightening."

"Maybe. But you *are* smashing up our space research."

"I'm sorry. That's something I don't think even you could understand."

Tessa reacted to that as might have been expected.

"Try me! Just explain why you, an alien from the stars, has to come to Earth and stop us from exploring space." She was fierce, now. "Go on! Explain that!"

"It's our assignment," Vinter said, a little impatiently. Cottell's backward questing perceptions led him to twist in his seat and stare back along the highway.

"The hunt is up, Fetras," he said. "They're coming."

"Umm," said Fetras Vinter, recalled to his position as a Galactic agent upon a primitive world. Now the natives were stirred up; they were after his blood. The situation was not novel to Vinter, or Cottell; but it would never become pleasant. He accelerated and jerked his head at Cottell to study the map They had to find a hideout.

Tessa, still angry with her own thoughts, the facts of what these aliens had done far outweighing the now accepted fact that they *were* aliens, sat with compressed lips.

Vinter ranged back along the road with his mind, spotted the car, selected the distributor leads, and yanked.

"I have to stop this last effort at putting a rocket up, Cottell," he said. "Then, if you agree and your hemisphere has been dealt with, we can leave Earth."

"My bloc caved in a lot quicker than yours, Fetras. Perhaps we might arrange something together." He did not look at his friend. "What is the position of this girl?"

"I wish I knew." Vinter followed the directions pointed out on the map, scarcely heeding them, thinking of Tessa. "The natives will operate their search-net for us. It is primitive, as might be expected; but it is operating under their own known conditions. We will be caught in the end. So we must be quick about our task."

"My perceptions from this native girl tell me that she expects something soon. She reacted strongly."

"I agree. The same impression was conveyed by the two natives who jumped us. This means that they are personally concerned. In that case I have found they use a launching site we can operate into easily." Vinter pointed out the location from which he had first—and subsequently—wrecked takeoffs. "There, Cottell. And let us hope we can finish before the native police find us."

Driving through the early evening dusk, the three remained silent, absorbed with their own problems. When at last they halted under the eucalyptus tree and got out, stretching their legs, Tessa was ready for them. She made no effort to escape, and Vinter realised with a profound gratefulness that not only did she accept his professed love for her, and return it; but that she was prepared to act on its dictates despite their alien origin. He felt elated.

"Now look here, Vin. You are an alien. All right, you can tell me all the things I'm dying to know later. Right now I want a straight answer from you." This was a prepared speech. Vinter waited for her to go on. "Just tell me why you are stopping us from going into space. Why?"

"It's our assignment, Tessa."

"Who assigned you, then?"

"Central Assignments, on Caerlongue."

"So all right, then. You were assigned. But that doesn't tell me why you're stopping us going into space."

"Listen," Vinter said, and went on to explain about Caerlongue, the war with the Terentii, Central Control and the various branches, his position as an agent of C.G.A.B. and finally his assignment, along with Cottell Surendra, to prevent the natives of Earth from going into space for fifty years."

"Fifty years!" Tessa said. Her hand went to her mouth. "But I'll be an old woman!"

"That could be avoided, on Caerlongue," Vinter said.

Tessa caught his hand, stared hard at him, willing him to give her all his attention. "Just tell me, simply, Vin, *why* are you stopping us?"

"Oh! I've heard stories of women asking silly questions," Vinter said, half exasperated. "I've *told* you. It's our assignment!"

She gripped his hand harder. "You were assigned to this work by a robot. By a machine. A mass of dials and cryotrons and transistors and condensers and shuttled electric current and came up with an order on a tape. You're obeying that order." Her nails were cutting his skin. "But why, Vin. *Why?*"

Cottell said: "Activity over the horizon, Fetras. This could be the launch."

"You've got to tell me!" Tessa was saying wildly.

Vinter could not free his hands. He sent his mind out over the horizon to the launching pad. The long count-down had gone into its finals. People's minds over there were screwing up under the tension; that old hatred and fear of failure blasted clearly across the quiet night under the stars.

Those men and women were friends of Tessa's. She had worked on this rocket—suddenly, Vinter knew that. He hesitated. For the first time a tiny nagging doubt hit him. He shrugged it aside. This was his job. Cottell was watching quietly, not interfering in this hemisphere; but any slackening on Vinter's part would be followed by direct action by Cottell, that was part of their training as agents.

"Fifty years!" Tessa was saying, over and over. She clung to his hands. "Why? What have we of Earth ever done to you star aliens? What makes you act like this?" Her features hardened. "Are you frightened of us? Do you fear that we'll overtake you, fight you, kill you? Is that it?"

Vinter, half his mind on the rocket on its pad, said simply : " You claim to have conquered outer space. You cannot even reach your own satellite yet. We sometimes have to move a planetary system from one star to another if the original star is going nova. Should we fear you ? "

" I don't know ! I don't know ! " The agony in her voice tore at Vinter. He concentrated on the rocket. Not time, yet to sabotage. Later, when nothing could stop the launch, would be the time.

" No," Tessa said. " No, you don't fear us. You despise us ! "

" That's not true, Tessa ! "

Cottell, not understanding the rapid flow of English, but clearly sensing the troubled emotions of these two, remained out of the argument. He settled down to monitoring the count-down. Tessa, freeing Vinter's hands suddenly, flung herself onto the warm ground. She huddled there, her blonde hair and white face shining under the first rays of the rising moon. Her red lips were black in that light ; her eyes enormous shadows.

" This is my job, Tessa," Vinter said, patiently, gently, trying to make this native girl understand.

She swallowed hard. " Please, Vin. Please. I must know. Can't you see that ? It alters everything—everything. You must tell me why the machines of your planet told you to stop us going into space. Please. "

Vinter struggled with the conception. Finally, slowly, he said : " An assignment, Tessa. We don't— "

Tessa sat up urgently. " You mean, you don't . . . "

" I don't know *why*," Fetras Vinter said.

Into the silence, at last, Tessa's voice dropped words that bit and stung. " You—don't—know—why ! "

The contempt lashed at Vinter.

Chapter Five

He was confused. Confusion, for an agent of Caerlongue, was almost an unknown emotion. He had felt dismay and anger at the sentence of the Central Records, when he had been told that Eva and he were not eugenically compatible ; but he had reasoned out that he would follow the normal pattern of his race, and he had. But this fierce girl, with her gusts of passion,

arguing about shadowy intangibles and demanding reasons of the Central Control—it was ludicrous. A native of this primitive planet daring to challenge the orders of the robots of Caerlongue !

He tried to express that in words that fell awkwardly from his lips. She stared back at him with open hostility.

"You come here, sent by some damned machine or other, mess up all our work—ruin my career—wreck thousands of millions of dollars worth of equipment, and you didn't even have the guts to find out why !"

"But it isn't necessary to know why the Central—"

"Don't quote your machines at me ! If the machine told you to blow your brains out—I suppose you would !"

"But, Tessa . . ."

He had no argument that could convince her.

Like a woman, she seized on a stray fragment of a past conversation. "I suppose your machines are frightened that we'll join up with the Terentii ? Is that it ? Scared that we'll ally ourselves with them ?"

"That, Tessa, I don't believe you could do. They are not human."

"That shouldn't worry a thinking being. I didn't expect to meet anyone from an alien planet who looked in the remotest way like a human being. You surprise me."

Cottell said ; "Count-down almost there, Fetras."

Vinter turned to Tessa again. "I have a job. Please do not interrupt." It was brutal.

She lashed back at him. "More rocket wrecking ? More super science expended on us poor contemptible 'natives' ?"

She was getting under his skin. "It is scarcely necessary to employ super-science on the so-called science of a planet of this order of savagery and ignorance," he said icily. "Just two men from Caerlongue have effectually prevented this entire planet from becoming a space-faring race. Just two of us." Then, for some odd reason, he could not forbear adding : "The war demands so much effort that we just couldn't spare more. If we'd failed . . ."

And then he saw the ugly personal implications of that.

Tessa saw them too. "So if I manage to kill you two aliens, nothing else will happen, and we'll fare out into space ?"

"I imagine, so, Tessa," Vinter said politely.

He looked hard at her, meeting her eyes. From those clear eyes and from her radiating emotions, he drew strength and confidence. She loved him. That meant she couldn't—

Tessa said : " They say on Earth that you always hurt the one you love." She laughed, disconnectedly. " Watch it, Vin !"

" Count down approaching terminal," Cottell said.

Tessa switched her intense gaze to Cottell. Then she looked around and it was clear that this was the first time she had oriented her self since leaving the motel. She checked the constellations, and followed Cottell's gaze.

" So you know, then," she said, and her voice cut Vinter with its dejection.

" We know that a most important shoot is about to take place. We think that if this fails, you will be discouraged enough for us to frame up this fifty-year limit."

" I worked on that ship," Tessa said. " Part of me is in the metal. Can't you let her launch successfully ?" She flayed him suddenly with scorching words. " After all, you don't know why you're doing all this. A machine told you to do this to me, and so you're obeying a machine and destroying a part of me. Nice going, Vin !"

Vinter made up his mind on two scores. He said to Cottell; " It has been growing harder and harder to manipulate items in the rockets, and now that we have—or I have, rather—the distraction of this girl, it may be necessary for you to re-inforce my powers. At this distance we will have to exert all our telekinetic know-how."

Cottell said : " Understood." He went on monitoring the count-down.

On the other score, Vinter went to his radio gear, quickly adjusted the settings and, as previously, through the ultra radio link in his submerged spaceship, called up Central Assignments on Caerlongue. The robot answered late, and Vinter was itching with impatience before he obtained a clear channel.

He said : " Certain fresh events force me to know why it is necessary for the people of Earth to be stopped from going into space for fifty years." Stated baldy like that it didn't sound too much like the subversion and treason it was.

Cottell said : " Count-down now on finals. Are you ready, Petras ?"

Switching from the radio, Vinter said quickly : " Go ahead, Cottell. As soon as I'm clear with Central I'll support you." To the mike, he said : " This is urgent, Central."

"This information is classified," the robot answered.

"The whole situation on Earth is in the balance," Vinter said, desperately, realising with a cold sense of shock that Tessa had manoeuvred him into a career-smashing corner. For his own self-respect, he had to have the answer. He babbled technicalities to Central, emphasising that the fate of his mission hinged on the answers. The way he was feeling now, that wasn't so untrue, either.

And, stunningly, he now knew that *he* wanted to know the answer. He was, pitchforked down onto this crummy little planet, fiddling about with primitive chemical rockets, when every instinct in him desired to be out in space dealing with the Terentii. That he had met Tessa was merely a small added filip; it couldn't, not the way he felt now, cancel out this sudden grudge he felt towards the machines of Caerlongue.

Cottell tensed, then relaxed. "Nine," he said. "Eight, Seven, Six . . ."

His brows drew down.

"Hurry it up!" Vinter said into the mike.

"Please hold for ten seconds," the robot said. The words rang flatly from the speaker.

"Four, Three, Two . . ."

"All right," Vinter made up his mind. Duty must come first. He'd gone so far with Tessa's plea had he not met her he would now be working with Cottell, smashing down the last and final rocket of these primitives. But he owed her an explanation. That, now, was clear.

Cottell gasped. He spoke urgently. "Fetras! You were right. These valves are tough—I can't budge them."

Flinging all his mental power into the work, Vinter checked the particular valve Cottell was operating on, added his own mental strength. The valve fluttered, then remained obstinately open. There was no need, now, for anyone to say: "Two, One, Shoot!"

Over the horizon a grumbling, thunderous bellowing began, shaking the night air. A glow stained the sky. The ground shook, slightly; everything trembled.

A star, a defiant orange star, rose above the horizon line. In the darkness it hung, glowing, like a precious jewel reflecting a single ray of light in a velvet box.

"Can't—budge—it!" Cottell said.

Both men were sweating. Tessa looked at them. Then she stared at the rising orange star.

And she laughed.

She laughed with malicious, pleasurable glee that chilled Vinter to the core.

"So your alien super science fails to work with us aborigines! You didn't make out! Am I sorry! Am I!" And she laughed, again and again.

Cottell wiped his forehead. "This bloc is out and into space, Fetras. Once they see they can do it, once they realise that, whatever they've done to their ships, they can beat the bogey—nothing will stop them. Nothing."

The radio coughed. The robot's mechanical voice, speaking over the parsecs from far off Caerlongue, said: "Here is the information you required. It has been cleared through Security."

"Go ahead," said Vinter. What was the use? He would now have to report failure. His mouth tasted vile.

"Some time ago a race of humanoids cut off from the Galactic network—survivors of an older expansion like the people of Earth—were at the point of making their entry into space. A scouting party of Terentii came across the system and realised that here was a fresh source of reinforcements for us of Caerlongue. They smashed the entire culture."

Tessa was listening uncomprehendingly to the alien voice from the speaker. Between sentences, Vinter began translating.

"Since that date it has been the policy of Central Control to help and encourage new cultures into space. They have been anxious to stand by us in the war. Recently the war has been going badly and we no longer have the numbers of space fleets to stand guard over these new planets until they can operate confidently themselves."

"Watchdogs . . ." Tessa breathed.

"Consequently it was decided that races such as those inhabiting Earth should be prevented from going into space until the war had passed to an improved phase. We knew that if we told them that space travel on its present scale existed but that they were not to join in, it would follow that they would resent this. There was even a faint prediction that they might ally themselves with the Terentii merely in order to get into space. Until a race has had personal experience of space travel, they are useless for the demanding tasks of space warfare. It

was necessary that Earth should not be allowed into space, and yet not be discouraged, because of these reasons."

The mechanical voice paused. Then: "Latest reports indicate that a wing of the Terentii fleet is enveloping the space sector in which Earth lies. Should the natives attempt to cross to one of the other planets, the Terentii would know that here was another antagonistic culture to them—the very shape of the people of Earth would show them that. We are pleased that you and agent Surendra have been successful. As soon as you return—beware of the Terentii scouts—another assignment awaits you."

The three of them—Vinter, Cottell and Tessa looked up to where the orange star was fast approaching bremschluss.

"So that's that, then," Vinter said.

"These people are clever," Cottell said, shaking his head. "They fixed their equipment so that it couldn't be budged. And now they'll reap the harvest of their cleverness."

"Oh, Vin—!" Tessa was shaking. "Vin! I—I'm sorry—"

"That's useless, now. Once the Terentii see that rocket—and the others that will follow . . ."

Tessa said: "It has to be seen to fail. It has to fail before our eyes. If you went after it in your spaceship and destroyed it, we'd still go on trying."

"Of course. That is the assumption we have worked on."

From the girl emanated a powerful emotion of confusion. Vinter, perceiving this, remained silent, sensing. Still the orange star above their heads dwindled—but continued to burn.

Tessa made up her mind. "I believe you," she said firmly, tossing her head back under the starlight. "The rocket was designed with all the other failures to work from. We found that somehow the valves and small items were jamming in the wrong places. We suspected some force, some unknown agency,—naturally we didn't dream it was alien telekinetic powers—and simply strengthened all springs, locks and tumblers. You two were merely trying to move an item by telekinetic power that was locked." She stared towards the star—the only star, now, that mattered. "Can you unlock—?"

"Yes!" blazed Vinter. "Quickly—explain—"

Tessa told them. The two alien minds reached out, checked what the girl had said, freed the lock, cut off the flow of fuel.

The star went out.

Tessa's breath sighed from her lips. She shivered.

Somewhere above their heads, tumbling now in free fall, a slim silver rocket was falling, falling back in a long, uncalculated curve, to burn up and vanish in the cloak of the air.

"The fourth stage failed to ignite," she said, softly.

"In fifty years," Cottell said in Chinese.

Vinter held Tessa. Her lips, in the moonlight, were ridged blue, hard, frozen.

"I'll never step down onto the Moon," she said. "Venus and Mars. Had pictures of them on the walls of my room since—oh, as long as I can remember. Funny, isn't it?"

"We could go there now, on our way back to Caerlongue."

Tessa laughed, amusedly, knowingly. "And then live on a world run by machines? You think I'd like that?"

"The machines bothered enough about a primitive world they had never seen to send me here to save you all from destruction."

"Yes . . . There is that . . . the reason behind it all. The *why* of why you're here."

"Come with me, Tessa. We are compatible; emotionally and physiologically—and I love you." His arm tightened around her. "And, this I promise you, if Central don't agree then I shall bring you back to Earth—and stay here with you."

He stood up, turning towards the car. Tessa broke free from his arm, and in the moonlight stood, still, silent, her blonde hair a mantle of snow.

"You would do that?" she said at last. "Give up all of space, for me?"

"I would, gladly."

She held out her hands to him.

"Then I'll come with you. I'll follow you—into space—where I belong."

—Kenneth Bulmer

Popular American author Robert Silverberg no longer contributes as much science fiction to this field as he used to, having turned to other forms of fiction as his main outlet. However, he does still find time for an occasional story in what is still his favourite literature.

VENUS TRAP

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

They brought it to me, of course. I'm the head of this outfit, since they have the idea I'm a diplomat, and so they brought it to me.

It started in my office ; I'm the Terran attache to the Venusian Embassy in New York—the catch being that the Venusians don't know that a fellow named Mart Robinson is attached to them.

My job, mostly, is simply to sit around and keep an eye on our blue-skinned brothers from space, and make sure they're only double-crossing us and not pulling a triple cross. Which, knowing them, I consider altogether likely at any time.

The Venusian Embassy is a tall, imposing building in midtown Manhattan. It looks just like every other office building in the midtown section. The only difference is that you can get inside any of the other office buildings without much trouble. No Earthman has entered the Venusian Embassy since the day the Treaty was signed, and the windows are pleasantly opaque.

No Earthman except one, that is. His name was Hilary Bowie and he was a short, sad-looking, washed out little fellow with an uncommon faculty for getting into places he wasn't expected to get into. He, and he alone, was my pipeline into the Venusian Embassy.

He walked into my office, carrying a fairly large, ominous-looking wooden box, and having a hard time of it. He set it down in front of me, and let me contemplate it unopened for a couple of minutes. "A present for Daddy," he said. He smiled. Somehow Hilary Bowie's smile has a way of making me feel even gloomier.

I looked at the box. It was about two feet long, about the same high, and had airholes punched in it. "You bring me a pet?"

Hilary nodded. "A cute one," he said. "Real cute." He tapped the box, and heard an unpleasant scrabbling sound come from within. It sounded like an army of crabs.

"Cut the suspense," I told him. "I'm busy, Hilary. There's a new Treaty revision coming up next month, and I have to—"

"Sure," Hilary said, and he smiled again. He's got a smile that makes a person feel like crying. "But you're going to have to write a different kind of treaty when you see what I've got here." He shivered. "Now that I look back, I don't see how I got the thing out of the building."

By now I was starting to get impatient, but I didn't dare open the box. "Go ahead," I urged. "Show the damned thing to me, will you?"

"Get me a bird cage," he said blandly.

"What?"

"All right, so don't get me a bird cage." He reached for the lid of the box.

"Hold it," I said nervously. I flipped on my intercom, with none too steady fingers.

"Cindy? I want a bird cage, on the double. About two feet high, and I want it here in five minutes, if not sooner. That's all."

"Yes, Mr. Robinson," she said, sounding more than a little puzzled. I could imagine some vivid cursing going on in the outer office, but I knew she'd get the bird cage.

And sure enough, she did. That's what I like so much about this job: when I say something, they *hop*. She walked into my office about three minutes later, clutching a great big gleaming bird cage in her lovely milk-white hand.

"Here you are, sir," she said coolly, as if digging up bird cages on a moment's notice were part of her everyday routine.

"Good girl. Just put it on the desk."

She looked queerly at Hilary's carton for a moment and left. As she went out she shrugged her shoulders, making sure I caught the gesture. Hilary has never impressed the rest of my staff much, but he's worth his weight in plutonium to me.

"There's your bird cage," I said. "Now show me." I glanced at my watch. Hilary had used up fifteen minutes of valuable time, and I had sixty-two different projects on the line with the brass upstairs breathing on my neck about all of them.

"Here you are, Mart. A little bit of poultry I picked up while visiting the Embassy this morning. As far as I know, they haven't missed it yet."

He leaned the box up near the open door of the bird cage and gingerly slid the lid off. There was a flutter of snow-white wings, and then I heard the door of the bird cage clang shut in a hurry.

I stared at the creature inside. A good ten seconds passed, and I just *stared*.

"All right, Hilary. You've hit the jackpot. What is it?"

"Can't you tell, Mart? It's plain as day, of course. It's a pigeon."

"Oh, sure," I said. "A pigeon! I should have seen it immediately, beyond any doubt. But," I asked, "where's it get that extra head? And what about those talons?"

"That's your problem, my friend," Hilary said.

It sure was. I stared glumly at the weird-looking thing in the bird cage.

Underneath it all, I could see now, there was a pigeon—an ordinary, perfectly conventional, harmless little fantail. But someone or something had redesigned this pigeon drastically.

Each of its two heads ended in a razor-sharp beak. Its legs were sturdy things tipped with claws like steel knives. Its four eyes were beady, bright, and, I thought, unnaturally intelligent. This particular pigeon had been converted into a pretty deadly sort of fighting machine.

I gestured out the window at the gleaming, opaque-windowed, unapproachable Venusian Embassy.

"I suppose you got this little pet over there?"

"I did," Hilary said. "I found him in a laboratory on—let me see—the forty-second floor. No, the forty-third. It was the devil's own job getting him out, too, but I figured you'd like to have a look.

"There were some other cuties in there too. A six-legged cat, a dog with three heads—an honest-to-God Cerberus—another cat with the damnedest mouthful of teeth you'd want to see, each one about six inches long and sharp as needles. They have a whole laboratory, filled with these pretty beasts."

"Each one having the basic form of some common Terran animal," I said.

"Right. They've taken our animals and built them into things like this." He pointed to the bird cage.

Just then the intercom buzzed.

"What is it, Cindy?"

"Mr. Garvey to see you, sir."

I frowned. Garvey was a scientist in government service. He also happened to be my sister's husband, and he felt that gave him some claim on my time. He had made a habit of dropping in on me every time he had some hairbrained project that he had thought could use my political influence.

"Tell him I'm in conference, Cindy," I said, watching the ex-pigeon making ferocious attempts to escape its cage and start slicing us up. "Tell him I can see him in a while, and he can wait if he's in no hurry."

"Yes, Mr. Robinson."

I turned back to Bowie. "Look, Hilary. You say the Venusians are playing around with Earth animals?"

"That's my guess, Mart. You know how shrewd they are at genetics. I guess this represents one of their little experiments."

"You don't have any notion why they're doing this?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," Hilary said. "For the sheer love of pure science, I suppose. Doesn't that sound likely?"

"Yeah," I said. "Real likely."

I got up and walked to the window and stared out. My office faced the Embassy Building, and that gave me ample opportunity to spend long hours staring out, wondering what the hell was going on behind its opaque windows.

Earth had been on more-or-less friendly terms with Venus for nearly fifteen years, which meant we had an Embassy up there and they had one down here, and that was the size of it. It was an uneasy sort of friendship, with not much warmth about it. We were both somewhat scared—hell, scared stiff—of the Martian Combine, and the Earth-Venus alliance was one of pure convenience. Though we didn't admit it publicly, of course.

The Venusians were fairly well humanoid, if you don't mind the blue skin and the extra set of arms. But we didn't trust them too much; they weren't, after all, human, and you can never tell what an extra-terrestrial will do next.

That unpleasant but painfully true fact explains why I had a job. Someone had to watch the Venusians; and I did, or tried to. I had a carefully-nurtured spy-system (consisting mostly of Hilary Bowie), and I had some contacts here and there who—well, there's no point going into details which might better well be kept out of the open.

But there was a revision of the Earth-Venus treaty coming up next month, and I had been warned from upstairs to keep a double patrol out. Before we committed ourselves to yet another alliance with Venus, we wanted to make thoroughly sure that we weren't tying ourselves into knots. The Venusians were too shifty to go signing peace treaties with just like that.

And now this.

"You know the scoop on this, don't you?" I asked. "If we don't find out just what the hell is going on in that building, and stop it before that treaty gets signed, we may find that we've handed Earth over to the Venusians on a stainless-steel platter."

Hilary nodded. "I'll be in there digging, Chief. Meantime you can keep the pet."

"Thanks," I said. I buzzed Cindy. "Send in Mr. Garvey, will you, dear?"

As Garvey entered, I surreptitiously slipped the bird cage down out of view behind my desk. I didn't want him to see it just yet.

"Hello, Frank," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"Just thought I'd drop in to see how business was going," Garvey said cheerily. There are times when I wonder what Jackie sees in that utter fathead; but she never questions my tastes in women, and so I keep from venturing my opinions on her husband.

He took a package from under his coat. I couldn't resist a quiver when he did that; after Hilary's visit, I was half expecting Garvey to produce a six-headed leapfrog or something like that.

"I've been doing some experiments, Mart. I thought you'd like a sample." He unpacked the little box. I watched, more nervously than usual.

And he drew out the biggest tomato you ever want to see. Pretty near the size of a melon.

I'm afraid I looked at him awfully impatiently. "Say Frank—"

"Just a minute, Mart. Take a look at this tomato. Big, isn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted. "So what?" I glanced at my watch.

He grinned. "It's mine; I grew it."

"Didn't know you were a farmer, Frank! A new sideline?"

"I grew this in my lab, Mart. I told you I'd been dabbling with hydroponics." He held the thing out proudly. "Ever see one that big?"

"What did you do to it?" I asked. "Blow it up with hot air?"

Garvey looked hurt. "You never take my work seriously, do you? This tomato's been treated with a growth hormone I've developed—an improved auxin."

"I thought oxen pulled plows."

"Very funny. For your information, auxin happens to be a well-known scientific term for the group of hormones that induce growth in plants. It's a relatively simple hydrocarbon, and has been commercially available for years as beta-indolyl acetic acid. But I've been working on a sort of super-auxin that puts the old stuff to shame."

He held out the tomato for my inspection. I hefted it in my hand. It was *big*, all right.

"That was produced with a one-in-two-thousand concentration of my new drug, Mart! If I'd wanted to I could have grown a tomato the size of a watermelon! The size of a cow! But—"

Here comes the catch, I thought.

"My appropriation's been cut off," he said sadly. "And Jackie thought, if I saw you, perhaps you could—"

"—get some money for experiments," I completed. I started to say no, then stopped. Bluntness is wasted on him.

"I thought we might go partners on the deal," he said timidly. "It has great commercial possibilities."

"Let me think about it a while," I said. "Sounds good."

Suddenly he was all gratitude. "Would you, Mart? It—"

I quieted him with a gesture. "I've got something more on my mind than big tomatoes, Frank. What do you think of this baby?" I reached down and lifted the bird cage into view.

He stared silently for almost a minute. "Venusian?" he said at length.

"Partially," I said.

"It was a pigeon once," Garvey said. "I mean, is it the Venusians who—oh, it has to be. There's not a geneticist on Earth who could produce a creature like that."

"You're sure of that, Frank?"

"It's my field, isn't it? That pigeon's been genetically manipulated by experts, and I mean experts. The Venusians have forgotten more about genes and chromosomes than we've ever learned. I'd stake my reputation as a geneticist that that bird's a Venusian product."

I nodded. For once I took him seriously; Frank may be a featherhead in many ways, but I trust anything he says professionally.

"Any opinions?" I asked.

"That's your job, isn't it? All I can tell you is that it's been manipulated, and a damned good job of it." He leaned over and whispered confidentially. "Tell me—have you people made any progress in combing genetic techniques out of the blueskins? They know more about genetic engineering than—"

"I know," I said. We'd been trying frantically to steal genetic info from the Venusians, but we hadn't been half so successful as they had in lifting our atomics knowledge. "Do you think this thing will breed true?" I asked.

"I don't doubt it," said Garvey. "I'm sure it's a genetic mutation, not a mere phenotype alteration. Nasty-looking thing, isn't it?"

I nodded. "It's a nasty business, Frank." I stood up, and started to shoo him out. "Try me on that tomato deal soon, will you?"

"Sure, Mart, sure. I don't want to interrupt anything—"

"And give my best to Jackie, and, uh, drop around sometime soon, huh?"

"Sure thing," he said, as I nudged him through the door.

The brass reacted as expected. I took the bird to Pitman, my immediate superior, and spent about half an hour explaining the meaning of genetic manipulation—no easy job, since for one thing explaining things to Pitman is a task for a super-genius and for another I'm pretty vague myself about genes and chromosomes.

His reaction was a simple and predictable one.

"This looks dangerous to me, Robinson. I'd suggest you let Colonel Kennerly have a look at it before we go any further."

Kennerly bounced me up to Madison, and Madison sent me on to the Chief. I half expected him to refer me to the Archangel Gabriel, or someone, but he didn't.

"You say your men saw dozens of these experiments being carried on in the Embassy?" the Chief asked, his thin lips set in a grim mask.

I nodded.

"Hmm. This looks dangerous to me, Robinson. Put a stop to it before the treaty's signed."

He looked at me with that what's-the-matter-you-need-an-engraved-invitation? gleam in his eye, and I got out of there in a hurry.

Put a stop to it.

Sure. Walk into the Venusian Embassy, which is so bottled up that not even the Chief could get in there, and demand that they cut out their genetic monkeyshines. I could just see it now.

I pictured myself staring up at some big blueskin and saying pompously, "One of my spies has found out about your nefarious doings. On behalf of my government, I demand you Bring These Activities to a Halt or else."

Oh, sure.

There had to be some more subtle way about it. I had to do it, quickly, to be sure, but with great subtlety, so that the Venusian got scared and laid off.

But how do you scare a Venusian?

I blasted off for Venus later that evening on a chartered ship, figuring the best thing was to go straight to the root of the trouble. Besides, I'd always had an urge to see the place.

It was hot and sticky. I got a native carrier to take me to the Terran Embassy, which was a frumpy-looking building about three stories high, in an obscure corner of some village.

I walked in, bird cage dangling from my hand.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Robinson."

"Glad to meet you." The short, squat, heavily-tanned, worried-looking man who greeted me was Jansen, the new ambassador. He'd just been promoted. When I had last seen

him, back in 2160 or so, he had been a file clerk, but time has a way of moving on.

He didn't look much like an ambassador, clad only in a pair of trunks. I couldn't blame him; I was still in my business suit, and regretting it. It's *hot* on Venus.

"You've met me before," I told him. "You were a clerk in the E-T office, and I was—"

"—the kid who ran the mimeo machine!" Jansen's dark face creased in a smile. "What brings you up here?"

"Trouble. Big Trouble." I unveiled the bird cage and told him the whole story—how the Venusians were plotting something devious with our wild-life, and how we didn't like it.

"That's a beaut," he said, pointing at the pigeon, which was still fiercely attacking its cage. "It's as weird as some of the things they've been doing here."

"You know about them?"

"The jungles are full of them," Jansen said. "They just turn them loose after they've manipulated them. You ought to see them. The local fauna is strange-looking enough, but once the blueskins get through juggling them they're *really* out of this world."

He reached up and rang a bell. Another Terran came in.

"Excuse me," he said. He turned to the other. "Bring in a bowl of meat, will you? It's feeding time."

The newcomer grinned. "Your pet's getting hungry, eh?"

"Something fierce. I forgot to feed it yesterday." He turned back to me as the other left. "Sorry."

"What sort of pet?"

"Local creature," he said. "Helps brighten up the office." He paced nervously back and forth. "You say there's a treaty revision coming up?"

I was astounded. "You mean you didn't know?"

"They never tell me anything," Jansen said, smiling apologetically. "I'm just a glorified file clerk still. The only reason we have an Embassy on Venus is because they've got one down there, and we can't let them get a step ahead of us. Don't you forget it."

"Yes," I said, trying to ignore his outburst. "There *is* a treaty revision coming up. And I have to put a stop to this genetic foolery before we sign the treaty, or else."

Jansen smiled. "Just like that, eh? I wish you luck. The Venusians are as talkative as clams. You'll have to scare them real hard to get them to bow to you."

"I know," I said, thinking of the calm, inscrutable blueskins. It'll take a heap of scaring, I thought.

Just then the other Earthman came back in, bearing a little plate with some chunks of meat in it.

"Watch this," Jansen said. "It may amuse you."

He drew aside a curtain and revealed a potted plant, about a foot high—the meanest-looking, ugliest mess of vegetation I'd ever seen. He put the dish of meat down in front of it, and hurriedly drew away his hand.

I watched in horror as the plant lowered a couple of stringy, tendril-like branches, curled them firmly around two red chunks of meat, lifted them, and quickly stowed them inside a gaping orifice in the middle of a tangle of twisted, ugly leaves.

There was a gulping noise, and the tendrils descended again.

"What is it?" I managed to say.

"A local plant," Jansen said. "Fairly common in the jungles around here." He grinned. "Carnivorous."

"So I see," I said weakly.

"It preys on small wild life. I don't think the plant bothers the Venusians very much; they keep them as pets too."

I stared at it. "Some pet," I said. "Scares me to pieces. I wonder what a big one would be like."

"Ghastly, I suppose," Jansen said. "But this one keeps us entertained. It keeps our minds off problems."

"Yes," I said. A new light began to dawn in my eyes. "Say—you think I could get a call through to Earth right away? I want to talk to someone, and in a hurry!"

My boy arrived on the next rocket in, very much mystified and somewhat annoyed. He claimed he had all sorts of important work to finish, but I shushed him and very carefully lined out the assignment for him. He nodded grimly and set to work.

And he delivered. And how, did he deliver!

The Venusian Overlord came to visit us, at my request, the day after the job was finished. I dressed formally, in my Earth clothes. I sweated blasphemously, but I felt I wouldn't be able to sound commanding and business-like in a G-string.

Jansen introduced me as special envoy from Earth, and then edged away to leave us politely alone.

We fenced verbally for about five minutes, exchanging pleasantries about our respective planets, and sizing each other

up. Like most blueskins, he seemed fully clothed in nothing but his loincloth; he was about seven feet tall, and with shoulders to match. He needed the big shoulders; they provided muscle anchors for his four arms.

Then I began to bring in the genetics deal. I worked around it most delicately, explaining how we were aware that the Venusians were doing all sorts of experiments with our native wild-life. I didn't bother to tell him that we were worried silly about what they might do with the products of the experiments.

"There's nothing in the Treaty that forbids members of our Embassy from performing genetic experiments," the blueskin reminded me. "We are allowed to do whatsoever we please, just so long as we remain within our delimited confines." He spoke clearly and precisely, as if he'd studied our language just for the occasion.

"Ah, yes," I said. "But the animals your laboratories are producing constitute a *potential* danger to our planet, should they get loose. And, on occasion, this has happened." I uncovered the bird cage. *Exhibit A*, I thought.

"We apprehended this one near your Embassy," I lied. "You see, of course, how dangerous a beast it is?"

The Venusian frowned, lifting one of his arms to his forehead in a gesture I knew meant annoyance. "Yes, yes, of course. But I'm sure this was a mere accident. I'll see to it that due precautions are taken in the future, naturally, but you understand that our genetics programme is an important part of our scientific development, just as—ah—your atomics researches on Earth are to you. You can no more expect us to halt our programme than we would expect you to halt work on atomics."

There was a glint in his eye that suggested to me that he might be willing to consider a trade; he might swap some geneticists for a couple of our nuclear physicists. It didn't sound like a bad idea, but it wasn't up to me to negotiate it. Leave that up to the Treaty-makers, I thought.

"Well," I said, "I understand your position perfectly." At that point I decided I hated diplomacy. "And we of Earth will withdraw our objections, provided you instruct your Embassy to take stronger precautions against the escape of any of their—ah—products."

He smiled happily, and reached out with his two lower hands to grasp mine. "Fine. It pleases me that there will be no friction between our worlds."

I stood up, sliding my hand from between his. "Oh, by the way," I said casually. "Earth has begun a small genetic engineering programme of its own, you know. Nothing to compare with the magnificent Venusian techniques, of course, but it's a beginning, a beginning—"

I rang the bell. Jansen appeared. "Bring in the meat," I said. "It's feeding time."

I turned to the somewhat puzzled Venusian. "This is one of our first products," I said. "An opening, fumbling effort, shall we say? You'll note that our interests are chiefly in the flora, unlike yours."

I drew back the curtain and revealed one of the Venusian carnivorous plants. This one was some ten feet in height. It reared up from the floor like an immense bear, with its great nauseating tendrils waving slowly back and forth in the air. It made me sick.

I heard a little strangled cry of amazement come from the Venusian's throat, and I swear his blue skin turned a tinge greener.

Jansen reappeared, pushing a little truck to which some poor Venusian beast was clamped—an animal almost the size of a man. He rolled the little truck along the floor.

As soon as it came within reach, one of those immense undulating tendrils came pouncing down on it. I watched, sickened, but yet enjoying the whole thing.

The plant fed, noisily.

I shook Garvey's hand. "Wonderful job, Frank," I said sincerely. "I've just had word from Hilary that the Venusian Embassy on Earth is scared witless; they've made all sorts of concessions in the new Treaty provided we destroy our carnivorous plant before it has a chance to spread any seeds. They've even agreed to turn over some genetics information to us."

I shuddered, and knew how the Venusians must have taken it. They'd be willing to do almost anything provided we killed that plant.

I drew out my blaster and clicked the safety.

"What are you going to do?" Garvey asked suddenly, paling. My respect for him, which had been building ever since he'd produced that marvelous horror, melted immediately. Away from his lab, he was still a fool. I'll bet he expected me to blast him down where he stood.

"I'm going to get rid of your pet," I said.

"What for?"

"Because, you damned idiot, it's dangerous to the whole of Venusian society, and we've already agreed to destroy it before it breeds. Why, if that thing started seeding—"

Suddenly Garvey burst into chuckles. I though he'd split from laughter.

"What's so funny?" I snapped.

"You never did learn anything about science, did you, Mart? I didn't do any genetic engineering on that plant, man—all I did was blow up one specimen with my hormones, same as I did with that tomato I showed you. But that's *not* a mutation. It won't breed big plants any more than a rat with his tail chopped off will breed tailless rats. Any offspring of our plant here will be small-sized, of course, and so there's nothing to fear from him. Unless you go too close to him."

"You can't be too careful."

"No," he said dreamily. I looked at him. He seemed to be floating somewhere.

"What's with you?"

"I was just thinking," he said. "When the Venusians get around to turning over their techniques to us—"

"What then?"

"Think of the wonderful tomatoes we'll grow!" he said, almost shouting. "And they'll breed true!"

I smiled. What else can you do?

—Robert Silverberg

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THE EASY WAY

by LAN WRIGHT

"Trade," remarked Don Jaime Cordell academically, "is a matter of accomodation."

Dallow grunted sourly. He'd heard Don Jaime make the same remark on a score of previous occasions, but under much happier circumstances as far as he himself was concerned. Any situation which could drag Don Jaime twenty light-years across space from his native Earth had to be bad for the man on the spot—and Homer Dallow was the man on the spot in more ways than one.

Don Jaime's presence wasn't improved by the looming bulk of his personal servant, Ayeko Tanashi, who stood behind his chair like a large yellow idol. Ayeko stood all of six feet six and weighed close to eighteen stone; he wore a permanent grin under a straggly black moustache, and his black button eyes fastened unblinking and unwavering upon whoever his master happened to address. Altogether, the last couple Dallow wanted to see on the planet Sharon were Don Jaime and Ayeko.

"You've had two years," went on Don Jaime with gentle insistence, "in which to expand our trade with these people, and, frankly, Dallow, you haven't made much headway."

"If you'd read my reports—" Dallow began.

"Oh, I have. I have." Don Jaime nodded his bald head, and his rotund, red face beamed benignly. "And I admit that you seem to have had some difficulties. The question remains though, what are you going to do about it?"

Dallow leaned back and gazed at the ceiling. When Don Jaime started asking questions like that one could expect some simple solution of his own to follow quickly—a simple solution that was, once it had been propounded. There would then be a gentle, almost sorrowful, insinuation that, if he'd put his mind to it, Dallow could have come up with the same answer . . . Dallow wasn't normally apprehensive. His record with the Trans-Galactic Trading Company was as good as any, but he was the first to admit that the past two years had tarnished it more than a little.

When the planet Sharon had been declared an open world three years earlier he had handled the question of franchise for the Company, and Don Jaime's reward for his success in the face of a lot of competition had been to appoint him local agent on Sharon with the prospect of a head office post at the end of his four year contract if things went well.

But nothing had gone well.

The immediate area of Terran control covered an area of fifty miles radius from the Terran base. Control wasn't exactly the word for it. Control could only be applied to the square mile of prefab huts and roadways that covered the small plain which was almost the only flat piece of ground on the tumbled, jagged surface of Sharon. The rest of the area was that over which a Terran might travel by copter or on foot with an even chance of getting back to base.

Despite the shortage of flat land the planet wasn't mountainous. The terrain was rough and jagged, with small ranges of hills that were nowhere higher than a thousand feet. A million tiny temporary streams ran along the bottoms of a million tiny permanent valleys into tens of thousands of small lakes. On Sharon there were no oceans for there were no great valleys in which the water could collect. Thus the difficulty for greater exploitation of the savage world that someone had ironically christened Sharon.

"I repeat," said Don Jaime, "what are you going to do?"

Dallow brought his eyes back from the ceiling and scowled angrily.

"Short of going out and collecting the Kiprit plant ourselves," he retorted, "I haven't got a clue."

Don Jaime tutted gently for a reason that Dallow knew too

well. The complete impracticability of his suggestion had been proven long since. The rarity of the Kiprit plant, plus the hazards of the planetary terrain, made it an impossibility for Terrans to operate on an economic basis. The threat to life and limb was too great—even with modern methods of conquest and survival. Thus, it was left to the local natives to bring in supplies for trade as and when they thought fit—and that wasn't very often.

"Anyway," added Dallow, "it's about time they synthesized the blasted drug, or found some way of cultivating the Kiprit plant away from its natural habitat."

"I am assured that it will be at least five years before either possibility is in sight as a commercial operation," replied Don Jaime. "And in that time hundreds of sufferers from Waldo's Disease will die—unless we increase our exports from this confounded world."

Dallow didn't need Don Jaime's assurance on that point. He'd not personally been acquainted with the peculiar and deadly nervous complaint known as Waldo's Disease, but he'd seen the results of it and they weren't pretty.

"Then why not set up more bases here, and increase output that way?"

Don Jaime sighed. "My dear Dallow, if that were possible no one would be more pleased than I. Unfortunately, all approaches to the Colonial board along those lines have been turned down because of more pressing problems elsewhere. The only alternative would be to use the Company's financial resources to that end."

"Well?" Dallow demanded belligerently.

"It is a question of economics," Don Jaime said patiently. "If we could be guaranteed a market for Kiprit over a period of, say, twenty years, it might be worth the millions such a scheme would cost. But there is no such guarantee." He shook his head. "No, Dallow, the solution, if one is to be found, must come from here, which is why I decided to come myself."

Dallow sighed. "Well—"

"Tomorrow I wish to visit the tribe of—ah—natives who supply us with the Kiprit—"

"What?" Dallow cocked an incredulous eye at his employer. The very thought of Don Jaime coming into contact with the native Sharonians appalled him. If there was one thing the natives derided it was physical shortcoming, and compared

with their muscular development almost every human was a weakling to be tolerated but not taken too seriously—which was the main reason why threats and cajoling did nothing to increase the supplies of Kiprit. The Sharonians just didn't have the slightest respect for a race who were so inferior physically ; in fact they held Terrans in the sort of contempt that no amount of technical achievement could diminish.

Dallow himself was no stripling, but even his six feet three and fourteen stone of solid flesh had received contemptuous glances when he'd first made contact with the natives. Now, after two years, they accepted him, and that was more than they would do when Don Jaime put in an appearance.

"Do you know what you're getting into?" he asked.

"I believe so," beamed Don Jaime. "I have made a study of Sharonian culture—"

"Culture! Hah!"

"—from the few authorities available, and I am quite well aware of their reliance upon, and adoration of, physical strength."

"Have you ever seen seven and a half feet and twenty-five stone of solid bone and muscle, with four arms and a couple of rows of teeth that would do justice to a killer shark? Any one of them could crush the life out of a Venusian marsh bear in one minute flat—and bite it's head off at the same time. They throw four hundredweight rocks about just for the fun of it—"

"My dear Dallow, the responsibility is mine, not yours. In any case, I shall take Ayeko with me."

Dallow said nothing. Ayeko was an imposing figure in any company but that of a Sharonian. Still, if Don Jaime really wanted some action, then he, Dallow, was hardly in a position to deny him the opportunity.

"It'll be rough going," he warned.

"We shall go by copter, shan't we?"

"Only so far. There isn't a place for a copter to land even within half an hour's foot slog of their village."

Don Jaime lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "But surely the village itself—"

"That's out," broke in Dallow hurriedly. "Sure there's a flat place about fifty feet across, but what would happen to the copter if one of their bright boys decided to try his strength against one of our devilish contraptions? And they would too, believe me."

"Oh!"

"Do you speak the language?"

Don Jaime shook his head. "A few phrases which I picked up from films and books, but I didn't consider a hypno course worth taking for just one visit."

"Doesn't matter. I'll do the talking anyway. They know me. What about Ayeko?"

"Oh, no. He was born without vocal organs, I'm afraid," Don Jaime explained. "If he'd been treated as a youngster some surgical cure might have been effected, but he was born in one of those less civilised places—some remote Japanese island, I believe."

All of which made Dallow feel sorry for Ayeko, but didn't help to ease the brooding menace of his presence.

Dallow laid on the copter for the next morning after breakfast, and he saw Don Jaime and Ayeko were suitably attired in the one-piece plastic suit that was standard for ground travel over alien territory like that of Sharon. The suit, unfortunately, wasn't designed for Don Jaime's short, rotund figure, and the only one in stock that fitted him at all proved to be loose in some parts and skin tight in others. The overall effect was such that Dallow shuddered in horror as he thought of the impression his employer would have on the powerfully muscled Sharonians.

They took off an hour after breakfast, and flew under purple skies over mile upon mile of bilious green vegetation that was scattered profusely over jagged spines of rock.

The copter set them down in a small clearing between two sharply rising buttresses of rock, and Dallow told the pilot to call back for them in two hours time.

"Two hours?" queried Don Jaime.

"It'll take at least half an hour to get where we're going," Dallow told him. "That'll leave us about an hour to talk the chief round to our way of thinking—if we can—and you know my views on that possibility."

"Oh." Don Jaime digested the information. "And what is he like?"

"Who? The chief?" Dallow shrugged. "I don't even know who it'll be until we get there. You see, the chief is the one who defeats his predecessor in combat, and they're so evenly matched that the ruler changes about as often as you change your underwear."

"Ah, yes. I think I read something about it."

"Yes, well, sometimes you get one of them lasting as much as three months or more, but that isn't often."

"You mean they're always fighting among themselves?"

Dallow nodded. "There's a ritual about the whole affair. The usual primitive kind of arrangement. You know, insult—challenge—duel. If the old chief is defeated then he can't challenge the one who whipped him, and if the challenger is beaten then he can't have another crack at the chief during his current turn of office."

"Interesting."

Dallow moved towards the wall of vegetation before them. "Well, we'd better get moving."

His original estimate of half an hour wasn't far out. On his own he would have done the trip in less than that time, but neither Don Jaime nor Ayeko had any experience of the terrain. They had to scramble up ten to twenty feet high edges of rock, and slide precipitously down the other side. They slipped on rotted vegetation, and tripped over thin root strands buried beneath. All in all, Dallow was surprised that Don Jaime stood up to it as well as he did.

They came upon the village quite suddenly as they toiled over a large, serrated edge of rock. It lay in the small valley below them, an untidy collection of rude huts rising up the twin slopes on either side of the inevitable twisting stream. The vegetation had been cleared away from the central area to make a flat plain of smooth earth about fifty feet in diameter that was the centre of the community.

Don Jaime's first glimpse of the natives brought a gasp from his lips. No pictorial presentation could capture the living reality of a Sharonian male in all his muscular glory.

"Pretty, eh?" commented Dallow. "Let's get a closer look."

"No sentries?" asked Don Jaime in a shaky voice.

"No need. There isn't another tribe within a hundred miles, and contact between them is almost non-existent because of the terrain. Internecine warfare hasn't come to Sharon yet, and I doubt if it ever will."

"Hence the practice of individual combat. I see."

Dallow led the way down the slope and into the collection of huts. He noticed with some misgiving that his own presence was almost ignored. That of Don Jaime Cordell was not. The evil, reddish-brown eyes of the Sharonians fastened on his

short, plump form, and it didn't need an expert to interpret the rumble of alien chatter and the hoarse, bellowing grunts of amusement that were not so unlike Terran laughter.

Dallow sighed and headed for the largest of the huts, and halted outside the entrance under the inquisitive scrutiny of a score or more four-armed giants.

"Just let me do the talking," he said to Don Jaime. "If I want to know anything I'll ask you, if I don't just you keep quiet. All right?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." Don Jaime was eyeing the most adjacent of the Sharonians, a seven and a half feet giant with two rows of yellow evil fangs, with some apprehension.

Dallow turned his attention to the hut entrance, and called in well-accented Sharonian, "I see you, who are the chief, and greet you with open eyes and peace in my heart."

There was a pause of several seconds followed by a rustle and a grunting from within. Out of the door stepped a giant native all of eight feet tall and of fearsome appearance. He fixed Dallow with an unfriendly glare and replied, "I see you, Dallow. Are you fit yet to challenge my reign?"

"Oh." Dallow relaxed. "It's you again, Karamantan."

"Whom else should it be?"

"Indeed you are truly fitted."

"Who is the ugly weakling with the shining head who insults me with his presence?"

Dallow choked, thankful that Don Jaime didn't speak the tongue.

"He is a great man in my world who—ah—suffered a—um—physical mishap."

"It would be better to kill him and stop his suffering."

"Yes, well, he—er—he's prepared to suffer so that he can help others."

Karamantan said nothing.

"I would like to speak with you, Karamantan," said Dallow tentatively.

"What was all that about?" demanded Don Jaime with disconcerting abruptness.

"Doesn't matter. Shut up."

"Sit you before my hut and speak," said Karamantan.

Dallow squatted and motioned Don Jaime and Ayeko to do the same.

"You are a great chief, Karamantan," he began. "And you are well known as a friend to my people—"

"The harvest has been poor," put in Karamantan with disturbing irrelevance.

"But still, the Kiprit can be found by those who seek," countered Dallow. "In return for the gifts we give—"

"You have nothing which we want."

"What about the machines to cut timber to build your huts?"

Karamantan sneered openly in the most horrible manner, and flexed his muscles in menacing fashion. "We have our arms and our strength. What do we need of tools which are fashioned by weaklings to cover their own failings."

Dallow sighed. It was just the response he had expected and it raised the ever present question of how to trade with a people who didn't want anything you had to offer.

"Is this the—ah—chief?" enquired Don Jaime.

"Eh? Yes, his name's Karamantan."

"And what does he say?"

"Precious little," said Dallow wearily. "The harvest has been poor—that's the excuse. The plain fact is that they don't want to go wandering about this blasted planet looking for the Kiprit."

"Surely the chief has some authority?"

"Of course he has, and if he ordered them to gather the Kiprit then they'd do it. Fact is, Karamantan just couldn't care less."

"Well, offer them something," urged Don Jaime.

Dallow laughed ironically. "You tell me what. I've tried just about everything that isn't on the Colonial Board's restricted list. Any labour saving device is looked upon as a dastardly attempt to undermine their physical superiority. Simple weapons they don't need—"

"When are you leaving?" demanded Karamantan with pointed insolence.

"You are strong and wise, Karamantan," said Dallow desperately. "When will you send us supplies of the Kiprit?"

"When the Gods smile upon us," replied Karamantan distantly.

And that was that, thought Dallow. To Don Jaime he said, "We are wasting our time here, chief. I can't push it any more in case the trickle we are getting dries up completely. And it might, if I upset Karamantan too much."

"I see. In that case we shall have to try a different sort of approach altogether."

"Huh? What, for heaven's sake?"

Don Jaime pointed a plump forefinger at the Sharonian chief, called him by name, and then proceeded to address him with a sulphurous flow of invective in the Sharonian tongue. The effect of the villification was heightened by an execrable accent which showed that Don Jaime had learned the phrases parrot fashion from some expert in the language. Such phrases and adjectives could never have been found in a book or an instruction tape. With a fine display of gesture and in a stronger voice than Dallow would have believed possible, he insulted Karamantan, his parents, his brothers, his sisters, and all his other relations with the most horrible array of Sharonian obscenities that Dallow had ever heard.

He sat paralysed with shock and speechless with horror, quite unable to do anything while Don Jaime spoke and Karamantan turned a nasty shade of brownish purple. The Sharonians eyes became redder, his teeth grated, and his muscles flexed with terrible anticipation.

When Don Jaime finished the silence was electric, broken only by the menacing rumble that bubbled from the chief's bared and yellow teeth.

Dallow managed a strangled, "You stupid, lame brained son—"

"Tush, tush, Dallow," remonstrated Don Jaime. "Such language!"

"We'll be lucky to get out of here in one piece," growled Dallow. "What in hell—"

"When he issues his challenge," put in Don Jaime calmly, "you will tell him that I am willing to forfeit my right of combat in favour of Ayeko. You may add that I wouldn't insult the honour of a chief by pitting my puny body against his magnificence."

"What?"

"I don't think he will object."

"You—you can't do that."

"Why not, pray?"

"Why not? Dammit, he—he'll murder Ayeko."

Karamantan had recovered sufficiently to roar in a paralyzing bellow, "I will take the head from that obscene lump of squeaking flesh. He dares to insult me—the chief?"

"Do—do you challenge him, Karamantan?" Dallow asked shakily.

"It is an insult to my strength, but I have no choice."

"He challenges you," said Dallow flatly to Don Jaime.

"Well, go on, go on. Tell him about Ayeko—"

"All right, all right," snarled Dallow. "I just hope you know what you doing."

"I do."

Dallow put Don Jaime's proposition as tactfully as he could, and was surprised when Karamantan accepted without objection. It was clear that the Sharonian was so angry that he didn't care who he took to pieces as long as it was a Terran. Dallow passed the information on to Don Jaime who beamed benignly.

"Good, excellent. Now, what is the routine?"

"Routine. That's a laugh. There isn't one. You just get in there and fight, and hope that he doesn't break more than half a dozen bones before you have a chance to surrender."

"Not me," chuckled Don Jaime. "All right, Ayeko?"

The giant Japanese bowed slightly and beamed toothily, his black moustache straggling lankly over the ends of his mouth. He stripped the one piece suit from his powerful frame, and stood bare footed and naked save for a breech cloth. Even so powerful a body looked puny and stunted beside the towering bulk of the Sharonian.

Karamantan stormed towards the centre of the clearing waving his two upper arms and shouting hair-raising threats at the top of his voice. If mere belligerence counted for anything then he had the fight won six times over.

Dallow and Don Jaime were jostled by the crowd of natives as they formed a circle around the two contestants.

"You know," said Dallow, with sudden gloomy understanding, "Judo won't get Ayeko anywhere."

"Judo?" Don Jaime's eyebrows raised a trifle. "Well, no. Perhaps not."

The conversation was interrupted by an ear splitting howl as Karamantan launched himself on the grinning Ayeko. Dallow shuddered and closed his eyes. In doing so he missed the quick shuffle of feet as Ayeko slid to one side and chopped with the edge of his right hand at the wrist of Karamantan's lower left arm. The howl of rage rose to a squeak of pain and surprise that was cut off suddenly as Ayeko stepped inside and chopped

upwards with his left hand so that the edge took the Sharonian viciously across the throat. Dallow opened his eyes in pop-eyed wonder. Ten seconds and two blows had been enough to stop Karamantan dead in his tracks with one arm hanging limp and useless at his side.

"Not Judo," said Don Jaime mildly.

"I can see that," snarled Dallow, "But just wait till he gets a bear hug on Ayeko."

"Yes? Like that you mean?"

Karamantan had advanced, his three good arms reaching to claw the slimmer, smaller form within their murderous grasp. Ayeko made no move to avoid him, instead he picked a spot with academic thoroughness, and jabbed the bunched points of his right hand into an apparently harmless spot on Karamantan's remaining good left arm. The effect was instantaneous. The arm dropped limply above its fellow and the owner let out a bellow of pain that rang echoing across the valley.

The watching crowd were stunned and silent.

"Judo," remarked Don Jaime, "is a form of scientific defence which would be inappropriate under these circumstances."

Ayeko jabbed with the points of his fingers into Karamantan's lower abdomen, and, as the great head jerked downwards in pop-eyed pain, he hit the Sharonian a vicious hand edge blow under the left ear.

"However," went on Don Jaime, "this is a form of Judo which combines the elements of defence with a form of attack which is equally scientific."

Karamantan shrieked as Ayeko hit him across the throat with the edge of his hand.

"The edge of Ayeko's hand is so hard that it can chop an inch thick piece of wood in half," explained Don Jaime. "The same can be said of the side of his foot which he hardens by continual kicking and hitting against hard objects."

One of the feet he had mentioned made a ghastly cracking noise as it hit Karamantan's left leg above the ankle, and the owner toppled earthwards like a tree blown over by a heavy wind.

"This is known as Karate," Don Jaime lectured on undisturbed. "And I believe it originated in a pseudo-religious society of ancient Japan. There are, in the human body,

thirty-seven vulnerable places where pressure on nerves and joints can cause extreme pain and, sometimes, death. That is the essence of Karate. In the case of a Sharonian there are forty-one such points, most of them in almost the same places as in the human body, and all of them just as vulnerable to a well directed blow or jab."

A scream from Karamantan showed that Ayeko had found one such spot in the middle of the Sharonian's back.

"If he put his mind to it," remarked Don Jaime, "Ayeko could kill that savage. Of course, he won't. It is against his spiritual philosophy."

Karamantan struggled to rise and was laid low by a vicious side-footed swipe across the back of his bull neck.

"Of course," muttered Dallow hollowly.

"You will, naturally, see the effect of my little stratagem," continued Don Jaime, as Ayeko administered the *coup de grace* in the shape of a deliberate and well aimed kick in the region of the Sharonian's kidneys.

"Frankly, no. I don't."

"Dear, dear. I should have thought it was obvious."

Ayeko stood back grinning delightedly at the still form of his erstwhile opponent.

"Ayeko is now chief of the tribe," explained Don Jaime, "and they will be duty bound to obey him in all things he may order—through you, of course, Dallow."

Dallow was speechless with surprise and apprehension. He would never have credited such a benign old man as Don Jaime with such a Machiavelian brain. The possibilities which his ideas opened up were frightening in consequence.

"They won't stand for it," he stammered at last.

"Oh, I think they will." Don Jaime nodded complacently towards the stunned circle of Sharonians. "As is the case with all primitive tribes, they will defend to the death certain taboos and traditions—especially those on which their tribal life has been based for so long. Yes, indeed. I think they will accept the situation."

"If they don't, we're all in trouble," replied Dallow grimly.

"I think it might be a good idea if we left them alone for a day and gave them a chance to get used to the situation," agreed Don Jaime. "Tell them, Dallow, that their chief will return to them tomorrow to order their conduct for the future, and any who oppose him will be suitably challenged."

Dallow groaned and prayed he didn't get torn to pieces.

Their leave taking was quieter than he would have thought possible in the circumstances, but he wasn't really happy until they got back to the clearing and found the copter waiting for them. Only when they were safely off the ground and headed for base did his apprehension ease altogether.

"There's one thing bothers me, chief," he said to Don Jaime as they settled themselves in the passenger cabin.

"And that is?"

"Suppose Ayeko gets beaten?"

"I don't think he will."

"All right. Assume he isn't. That means he's got to stay here for anything up to five years to ensure that they do as they are told."

Don Jaime chuckled. "Oh, no. Ayeko leaves for Earth with me in a week's time. I'm not leaving him on this pest hole of a world."

"Then—?"

"He will probably have to fight half a dozen of these people during the next few days to establish his authority, and that should put them in a rather subdued frame of mind—"

"I still don't see—?"

"Really, Dallow," sighed Don Jaime. "There are times when you seem to be most obtuse. Now, your contract has two years to run."

"Eh?"

"Sometime next week you will insult Ayeko and he will challenge you, and you will beat him."

A horrible sick lump of lead settled in the pit of Dallow's stomach as the implication was born upon him. "Oh no. You wouldn't—"

"Before we leave, Ayeko will teach you the rudiments of Karate in case you should be stupid enough to get involved and issue a challenge. It will, of necessity, be an incomplete course since the normal period of training is in the region of seven years."

"I won't do it," howled Dallow.

"You might let me finish," Don Jaime tutted. "Really, Dallow. I should have thought the situation here was obvious even to you. All you have to do is avoid issuing challenges. I should have thought that was clear enough."

"What?"

"Hasn't it got into your head that it is always the chief who issues the challenge? These people haven't yet realised that once a person becomes chief he remains in the position as long as he likes by the simple expedient of refusing to be insulted by the actions and remarks of another. It is an old precept, Dallow, that it takes two to make a quarrel. You should have no difficulty in lasting the two years if you remember that, and when the contract is up we will arrange for someone to come out and challenge you and finish the job." Don Jaime beamed smugly. "I imagine a visit by you to the village every day or so will be sufficient to keep the tribe in order."

Dallow groaned and buried his aching head in his hands.

"All in all," continued his employer, "a most satisfactory end which ensures our supplies of Kiprit for as long as we may need them. Don't you agree, Dallow?"

Dallow's reply, under other circumstances, would have brought an instant challenge to individual combat.

Don Jaime Cordell merely tutted sadly.

—Lan Wright



Article

If you want to know the time—the precise, exact and irrefutably correct time—better install a caesium clock. They can even argue with Einstein.

TIME FOR MODERNS

by KENNETH JOHNS

During the Old Stone Age nobody worried much about time. Each complete rotation of the Earth gave the day as a convenient unit ; a unit that was as invariant as the law of kill or be killed. Division of time probably took a long while to mean anything to men ; time had always been divided into night and day, sleeping and hunting and eating.

What started mankind on the frantic rush of seconds-paring that operates in highly industrial civilisations today could very well have been early religious observances. Sub-units of the day—of time—could be arbitrarily obtained from a twig stuck in the ground—the shadow paced out angles roughly proportional to the time that had passed and would pass again.

The changing moon showed men that time was divisible ; the solar day and the sidereal day came into use. But, today, when measurement of microseconds is vital in many industrial processes and—from our point of view most importantly—in the science of astronautics, greater accuracy than this is required. No Moon or Venus probe is going to orbit anywhere near its target if the space scientists cannot time the firing accurately.

For the needs of the modern age, physicists delved into the microscopic world for their time regulating machines ; instead of counting swings of a pendulum they count the vibration of a crystal, the oscillations of molecules—and now they are down to counting the wobbles of one type of electron in one type of atom.

The crystal or quartz clock depends upon the ability of a carefully cut quartz crystal to vibrate at a critical frequency when the correct frequency electrical voltage is applied across it. Until very recently, these clocks were the most accurate in the world ; they operated in threes to eliminate slight variations and found their way into many industries in automatic control equipment.

Unfortunately, even the best crystals age so that their frequencies alter, and even though this snag could be overcome, they are dependent on having an absolutely unchanging environment—small changes in temperature affect them strongly. With the arrival of radio navigation it was realised that even the best quartz clocks were not good enough. Aircraft must have the benefit of infallible navigation ; for missile guidance over long distances even an error of a millionth of a second is too much.

So the ammonia clock was developed to act as a regulator for the quartz clock. This clock depends on the geometry of the NH_3 ammonia molecule—three hydrogen atoms arranged in a triangle with the nitrogen atom poised above them to complete the pyramidal form. Given a gentle nudge, the single nitrogen atom jumps through the hoop to the opposite side ; given sufficient energy, it vibrates backwards and forwards at a frequency of 23,870 million cycles a second. This is just the frequency of 1.25 centimetre radio waves. Theory said that ammonia gas should strongly absorb all radio waves of exactly that wavelength.

Experiment—happily—showed that theory was correct. The next step was to fit a crystal clock with a system whereby the crystal frequency was electronically multiplied to 23,870 million cycles a second, passed through a tube of ammonia and the strength of the signal at the far end used to operate a feedback mechanism that adjusted the oscillator circuit until no radio waves got through the ammonia tube. It was then self-tuning.

Like the spin of the Earth, this was all very well as far as fair accuracy was concerned ; but it wasn't as good as it might be. Results were not much more favourable than a crystal clock functioning on its own. The trouble lay in the use of such relatively large objects as molecules. They bounced around in the tube so that some were approaching and some retreating from the radio wave source. This brought the Doppler effect into play, broadening the absorption frequency. Further complications ensued when the ammonia molecules bounced off the walls of the tube ; their vibration rate altered.

To rid the clocks of these errors the caesium clock was invented. Caesium is a metal. One of its electrons spins as it orbits all on its own around the nucleus which in turn is spinning and both electron and nucleus generate their own magnetic fields. These interact so that the electron wobbles, or precesses, just as does a spinning top. The vital point is that the electron wobbles at 9,192,631,830 times—give or take 10—per second. This is the most accurately measured constant in physics and must be regarded as a great triumph for pure science. Caesium atoms absorb energy of this frequency by tipping the electron over to a different position—and there are not many disturbing factors on this sub-atomic level.

A jet of caesium atoms is squirted through a beam of radio waves of approximately 9,192 megacycles per second so that the electrons are tipped over. These atoms can then be pulled over to one side by a magnet so that they hit a detector. If the radio frequency is off the 9,192,631,830 cycles per second — then there can be no signals from the detector as the magnet has no tipped-over-electron atoms to attract. So a feedback mechanism gets to work to shunt the radio frequency back to its optimum frequency.

The result—an accuracy of one part in 10,000 million, equal to a tenth of a second in thirty years. This impressive figure will probably soon be improved upon to better than one part in a million million.

Even so and with this fine performance, the whole setup, particularly the feedback mechanism, is complex. A brand new idea, the maser, has simplified the measurement of microwave frequency by directly amplifying the oscillations to generate radio waves (look—no feed back !) which generate AC current which runs an electric clock. Using caesium atoms sprayed into a tube tuned to just the right size to

vibrate at the particular caesium frequency, physicists expect to achieve in accuracy of one part in ten million million.

Quite apart from the normal everyday use of super-accurate clocks there beckon a number of tempting ways in which the caesium clocks can be put to advantageous clearing up of mysteries. To begin with, it should be possible to measure accurately the vibration and rotation rate of molecules, atoms and nuclei.

Einstein has postulated a number of interesting possibilities in the world of science and space travel and the new clocks ought to help us in proving or disproving some of the old master's theories. The postulate that a radio wave or light wave travelling away from the Earth would have its frequency reduced because of the work it does in escaping against the pull of gravity can be put to the test. Caesium clocks at the summit and the foot of a mountain should show up this discrepancy—if it exists.

Installation of a caesium clock in an artificial satellite should demonstrate whether or not Einstein was right when he said that time would pass more slowly in a fast moving ship than to an outside observer. This might prove the conversation stopper in the acrimonious discussions that have surrounded this much debated subject—and the Americans consider that the experiment could be performed in a couple of years or so.

There remains one item of which we can be very certain. When the first manned ships climb for the planets, the web of radio impulses that guide them out will be based and controlled from a caesium clock, its atomic vibrations measuring and symbolising Man's conquest of time and space.

—Kenneth Johns.



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