

DUEL TO THE DEATH

Christopher Anvil

The fight began on the 3rd of March, 2363, Terran Standard Time, at 0822 hours by the chronometer in the cabin of the scout ship *Torch*.

It was at this moment that the tiny bell just behind the left ear of Stellar Scout Anthony Conger began to ring, and it was at this moment that the miniature transmitter atop the helmet of Conger's exploration suit transmitted the ringing of the bell. Before Conger himself was fully aware what was happening, the ship's Log had recorded the sound of the bell, and the exact time of its alarm. The ship's transmitter had relayed the information to a signal satellite overhead. The signal satellite had bounced the warning toward a central collector station waiting to slam this message or any other like it through subspace for immediate relay to HQ on Terra.

Before this process had time to more than begin, Conger felt a brief piercing sensation at the inside of his left knee, just above the top of one of the high sturdy boots that fit closely over the exploration suit's impenetrable skin.

Conger had time for a feeling of surprise, for a recognition that the bell signaled the passage of something through the supposedly impassable wall of the suit, and for the realization that the bell and the brief pain were connected. He was bending to find the cause, the indescribably sharp thorn or seed-pellet that must have pierced the suit, when the sense of fatigue hit him. He continued to bend, and when he hit the ground he hit it like a sack of mash that tilts and falls from the back of a colonist's truck.

Where Conger lay on the ground, some forty yards from his scout ship, he was among a low spreading mosslike growth that looked like a miniature forest, and he, with his suit, had by contrast the appearance of a gigantic mechanism that had abruptly been turned off, and now lay motionless. If there had been small creatures in the forest, they might have explored Conger, marveling at the size and complexity of his huge alien mechanism. They might have explored Conger, that is, if they could have penetrated the carefully-designed suit.

Inside the suit, Conger lay motionless. But the suit was wide awake. The suit noted, and transmitted data on, the extreme shallowness of Conger's breathing, the drop in his body temperature, the slowing of his pulse, the varying pattern of his brain waves, the alteration in his skin-resistance. The ringing of the alarm bell cut off as four little dots, parts of a pattern of dots that covered the inner surface of one of the thin layers of the suit, heated and flowed in a molasses-like stream that spread a layer of sticky fibers over the tiny hole at the back of the left knee of the suit. A tiny, microminiaturized receptor traveled spiderlike down the inside of the suit's left leg, paused at the knee, and swept its electronic gaze across the smooth tight inner suit Conger wore, and that at one point held a little droplet of clear blood. The tiny receptor sent back a very slightly fuzzy three-dimensional image of this blood droplet. After that, the suit maintained its even temperature, held the concentration of oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen at the proper levels, and reported continuously the respiration, pulse, blood pressure, and other indicators of Conger's condition. And the suit held itself in readiness to report and seal any new penetration of its tough layers. But beyond that, there was nothing more it could do, so it waited.

Outside, the messages sped toward the collector station, reached it, and were hurled in a tight beam through subspace to the relay that would send them on to HQ. At the relay, a phenomenon known as

"fringe radiation" sent a faint bubble of garbled transmission expanding through space from the relay at the speed of light. If anyone there had been interested, he might have unraveled this garbled transmission, and guessed at the sudden rise in human activity caused by a minute droplet of blood many light-years away.

All this took place outside the rough barrier of the suit designed to seal Conger from all physical contact with the planet he was exploring. Inside the tough but imperfect barrier of the exploration suit, and with due allowance for scale, equally great activity was taking place. The suit recorded what it could of this activity by the crude monitors of blood pressure, pulse, temperature, rate of respiration. But the suit lacked the means to detect the migration of white blood cells toward a point several inches above the droplet of blood that was the only visible evidence of what on a larger scale would have been called an invasion. The suit could not see this. It could not detect the rapid increase in the death rate of the polymorphonuclear cells and the monocytes that now congregated several inches below the left hip-joint. The suit lacked the means to infer, from the form of the brain waves, the minute changes that took place in the controlling centers of the unconscious man's brain. There were only the gross manifestations to suggest the changes in nerve currents, the shifts in electric potential, the violent activity at lymph nodes, the alterations in blood sugar and oxygen levels; the presence of foreign substances that entered the blood stream, were swept to the heart, the lungs, back to the heart and on to reach the brain.

The suit could detect none of this. But it could detect the sudden start as Conger became conscious, as the ancient mechanism that defended the body called, in its need, for help from the conscious entity that occupied the body, and made the need unmistakably clear.

The suit recorded the abrupt alteration in brain waves, galvanic skin response, pulse, respiration, and blood pressure. It could sense, for a brief moment, that Stellar Scout Anthony Conger was wide awake, apparently aware of his mission, aware of the alarm that had rung in his left ear, conscious of the need to correctly perform his duty. Then the gross indicators by which the suit judged altered wildly, and the suit had no way to know Conger, suddenly aware of his body's need, had thrown off all thought of the duties and ideologies imposed on him from without. The suit could only detect the moment of abrupt stillness, the indrawn breath, the sudden rush to an upright sitting position. The suit recorded the scream, dutifully obeyed the commands of Conger's muscles, multiplied the power of his sudden spring from the yielding forest of moss on which he lay, countermanded the attempt of his right hand to rip away the confining suit at his throat, countermanded his attempts to tear off the helmet, obediently multiplied the power of each wild movement that involved no injury to the man or the suit, recorded the desperate plea that burst from his lips, transmitted the one word, "God," to the ship that rested some forty yards away, detected but could not interpret the sudden steadiness that followed the frenzy, recorded the look of determination that passed over Conger's face, recorded the shift in all outward indicators, and the sudden faltering of the pulse.

The single word, "God," was transmitted to the signal satellite, and flashed through space to the collector, as Conger lay motionless. Meanwhile, the suit detected anomalies, but did not know how to interpret them. Conger lay unmoving. Within his body, the war was over, but the battle continued, just as isolated combat units will fight on, unaware that on a higher level the cause has been lost. A last message traveled out over the complex network leading from the control centers of the brain. The message traveled along many chains of nerve-cells, from axon to synapse to dendrite, and should eventually have reached all over the body. But at different points along the chains of neurons, the message was blocked between axon and dendrite, and there it ended. The heart continued to pump feebly, stopped, and then under the influence of chemical stimulation began to pump again. The violent resistance of neutrophils and monocytes continued in the abdomen, then in the region of the chest, reinforced by local cells that spat strange molecules at the alien host, that interlocked and clung to it, and then the fight continued along a lymph channel, entered a new and vicious interlude at a lymph node, continued more slowly, moving now along the throat of the motionless body, to pass under the angle of the jaw, the change in skin coloration

noted by a watching receptor in the suit, and duly recorded, transmitted, and relayed on a tight beam toward Terra.

And then, after a further interval of quiet, the body moved.

The suit duly recorded the fact.

The eyes opened, and shut.

The hands clenched and flexed.

The lungs drew in a sudden deep breath.

Pulse and respiration returned to normal.

The body stretched.

The eyes opened once more, and came to a focus.

They regarded a tiny receptor poised just above the chin, clinging to the inside of the suit.

An arm of the body hesitantly pulled free of the encumbering arm of the suit, and reached across the chest toward the receptor. The receptor entered a small niche at the edge of the transparent faceplate. The hand tested the strength of the niche, then returned to the arm of the suit.

The eyes closed.

The word "God" arrived at the end of tight-beam transmission through subspace, reached the relay, and was transmitted toward HQ, simultaneously with the faint globular echo that sent it expanding at the speed of light through the universe.

And at that moment, there were two nearly simultaneous transmissions, as viewed from a point halfway along the transmission-line linking Conger's body and human HQ on the home planet.

From the human end of the line came the single order, "Jettison."

* * *

From the other end, from Conger's motionless body, came a transmission the suit could not detect or record, and that was outwardly signaled only by a light reflexive narrowing of the eyes that the suit duly picked up. But the subject of the message passed, it could not detect.

This message, in the form of impulses on a totally different wave length from that usually used for direct human communication, brought a prompt answer, and transmission and reply flowed rapidly, imbued with a sense of urgency:

"I have the control centers. Not much damage to the host. But this organism isn't fully centralized. There is still resistance."

"You will overcome it. What caused the delay?"

"The organism has a separate exoskeleton. Passing it was exquisitely painful, and even then, the controlling organism was completely separate, covered by another exoskeleton."

"But you are now in control?"

"Yes. But there is resistance."

"What else is it that troubles you? You haven't told us everything. There is something else wrong. What is it?"

"The exoskeleton is occupied by other small organisms. What I have may not be the ultimate control after all."

"You have the information banks?"

"Yes."

"Suspend the vegetative functions and scan."

The suit now recorded, and transmitted, the fall in rate of respiration, the slowing of heartbeat, and other gross indications. Again, later it failed to detect the resumption of a different form of transmission.

"Yes. We have it. Resume the vegetative functions."

"What is it? What does all that mean?"

"As nearly as we can tell, it means you have a find equal to the greatest ever made in our whole history. We also judge that you are in serious danger. The ultimate control mechanism is located outside the exoskeleton, completely out of our reach on another planet. The exoskeleton is partially subject to external control."

"It hasn't resisted in any way since initial entry."

"There is a time-lag, similar to that of impulses passed over a nerve. Your only hope of safety is to leave the exoskeleton."

"In scanning, I saw that this may be fatal to the organism."

"There is no time to explain. Merge your consciousness with ours and let us control the organism."

The suit now recorded a rapid increase in oxygen-consumption, not accounted for by any violent physical activity, and followed by the withdrawal of both arms into the suit. A moment later, both arms struck violently at the large clear headplate, distorting the tough plastic, but not breaking it. Another violent thrust produced a similar bulge, but the plate did not break. A third attempt failed to cause more than a minor distortion.

The one-word order from human HQ, "Jettison," now reached the end of subspace transmission, left the collector, and flashed toward the communication satellite.

The suit, recording a further increase in oxygen consumption, missed the messages that passed back and forth in mounting desperation:

"Can't get out that way. You will have to return the organism to its vehicle, and follow the customary procedure."

"But you said yourselves . . . What if the destruction order is already on its way?"

"There's no help for it. We'll just have to move fast. Get out of the way, and give us control."

"No. This is the only way. I sense it."

"Give us control! There's no time to argue!"

"These limbs aren't even strained. That was no maximum effort. There are safety devices . . ."

"Give us control!"

The suit recorded a sudden cessation of breath.

The single word "Jettison" reached the communications satellite, flashed to the scout ship, triggered a special circuit—

Simultaneously, the suit's receptors signaled the sudden bursting of the headplate, the unseating of gaskets that sealed the oversize helmet to the body of the suit, and the violent thrust that brought the suit's occupant almost out through the wide neck of the suit.

The special circuit in the ship some forty yards away flashed a message to the suit, and following that, a different message to another part of the ship.

There was a bright flash at the midsection of the suit, and a blast of flame from the mouth of the suit.

The ship quivered, a puff of smoke escaped at the edges of the closed hatch, and a flash of flame showed at a small window, to be followed by a dull roiling visible within, and many spreading cracks in the window itself.

The ship transmitted a last scene of the shattered burned remnant that had been Stellar Scout Anthony Conger.

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That message, followed by electromagnetic silence, trailed out of the communications satellite, reached the accumulator, streaked through subspace to the relay, ballooned out faint and shadowlike in all directions as an expanding sphere, and simultaneously hurtled into the communications network that quickly cast it in clear visual three-dimensional form on a screen at Luna I HQ.

A tall, strongly-built man, with three comets at his lapel, watched the screen closely, then turned to a shorter man with one comet at his lapel, who in response made brisk rubbing motions with his hands and said, "That ends *that*."

The taller man glanced around the little group of pale, grinning, slightly sick technicians and lesser officers, and when he spoke, his voice grated.

"Play that over."

"Sir?"

"Play that over. I want to see it again."

As the technicians turned to obey, the shorter of the two men, with one comet at his lapel, gave a slight nudge and said to the other, "General Matthews has a cast-iron stomach. That's how the high command is selected." He glanced at Matthews, and there was no response. The superior of the two generals was studying the chaos on the screen. When it was over, he said:

"Play it again."

One of the technicians bolted from the room.

The others bent numbly to their jobs, avoiding the sight.

When it was over, for the third time, Matthews said, "Take the end of that, the last few seconds, and make it up into blown-up stills. And I'll want representative stills of the rest of the incident. From beginning to end."

As the technicians and lesser officers of the headquarters communications center obediently bent to their tasks, the shorter man with one comet at his lapel turned to study Matthews with a look of puzzlement.

"Hell's bells, the thing's dead."

Matthews turned away and said as he walked off, "Come into my office for a minute."

As if drawn despite himself, the other man followed.

Matthews sat down at a large desk, and slid across a box of cigars.

"Help yourself, Cutter," he said, with no particular inflection in his voice.

"Thanks," said Cutter. He glanced at Matthews uneasily. "Say, Brad, I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn out there. I know you've got the rank, and all you've got to do is snap your fingers and I'll spend the rest of my service life okaying requisitions for brass polish."

Matthews' face strained in the effort to produce a smile, failed completely, and the resulting distortion chilled Cutter as no reprimand could have done.

"Sir," said Cutter. "I'm very sorry. Please accept my apologies for the . . . the undue familiarity."

"Yes," said Matthews, puzzled by this sudden shift of attitude.

"We get . . . well . . . pretty free and easy and informal out there on the frontier, sir."

"Perfectly all right," said Matthews. "I understand." He made another attempt at a smile, as his awareness of the situation told him that only a smile would relieve it. Matthews did not really feel like smiling, but he was accustomed to supply lack of feeling with conscious effort, and he supplied it now, lifting the corners of his mouth consciously in imitation of a warm friendly smile.

Cutter wilted in his chair, all the easy assurance and camaraderie of frontier life burned away in a realization of just how fatally he had angered his superior officer. Matthews' grimace told him plainly what volumes of words could never have expressed.

Matthews, seeing Cutter sink back visibly, took this as a sign of relaxation, and settled back himself, pleased that he had been able to establish a proper atmosphere for what he had to say.

He cleared his throat. "You know, Cutter, this is a serious business. We have taken a great many precautions to protect our colonies from infiltration by unknown life forms. We did this, first, purely on a theoretical basis. But three times recently, on three separate worlds, we have run into this very phenomenon you've had a chance to see first-hand today. You appreciate that it's a serious business if our opponent, whatever it is, succeeds?"

"Yes, sir," said Cutter dully.

"You see," said Matthews, "The first time this happened, it was the cause for a mild alertness on the part of the watch team. The breaching of the exploration suit merely meant that our man on the planet might find himself in trouble from poison or some exotic disease germs. So we didn't stop it quite as fast as we

did today."

Cutter, despite himself, said, "What happened, sir?"

"The scout," said Matthews, "gradually changed form. I don't know how to get this across without sounding melodramatic. Before our eyes, we had a demonstration of physiological control. Bodily proportions changed, as if whatever it was that had gained control was putting its new captive through its paces. Testing the flexibility of the protoplasm. Then it reverted to the original form."

"What did it do then?"

"It started to get out of the exploration suit. We destroyed it."

Cutter hesitated. "Sir, what of the next time it happened?"

"The next time was just about the way it was today. We observed signs of a physiological struggle that just about matched what we had recorded from the first instance. We destroyed the suit, and the scout, and the scout ship."

"The three planets where this happened are close together?"

"Relatively speaking. The first two happened to be planets of stars in the outstretched upper limb of the constellation, Felis Major. The third star is roughly in line with the first two. They are all, roughly, in the same region of space. All three planets are Class A, with breathable atmosphere, perfectly suitable for colonization. Except for this."

The two men sat silent a moment. Cutter said, "Haven't I read . . . Isn't there some literature about this very thing?"

Matthews nodded. "The records aren't complete, but there's enough to give a good idea. The old magazines of technological speculation have reference to just such a situation. And we have most of a complete volume on this exact problem."

There was a thud and the soft tone of a gong, and Matthews lifted the cover of a low cabinet built into the wall to the right of his desk. He took out a stack of glossy ten by twelve photographs, in full and grisly color, riffled through them slowly, and tossed one across to Cutter.

"There's our problem."

Cutter looked at the photo, turned it around, and looked up in puzzlement.

Matthews said, "The head, shoulders, and upper body are all in one piece. The head isn't even seriously burned. I doubt that the heart and lungs have been put out of action."

Cutter started to speak, paused, then nodded slowly. He moistened his lips. "It's hard to appreciate that damage like this might not be fatal."

"But that's what we're up against," said Matthews.

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The creature was no longer in pain, having blocked the synapses of all but a few of the nerves leading in from the badly damaged surface of the body. Now, for the first time, it could spare the attention to answer the call that was repeating over and over again, an urgent demand for information.

"It's all right. Nothing serious was damaged. But this body has a capacity for pain unlike anything I've

experienced before."

"We thought you had been destroyed."

"The upper region of the body has only superficial damage. The lower region is in bad shape. There isn't much I can salvage. I'll have to discard most of it to avoid poisoning by the decomposition products."

"Can you handle it alone?"

"Not very well. I'm still under attack by the roving nucleated cells that infest this body. I'm hoping that the tissue damage will draw them to the surface so I can have freedom of movement in the interior."

"Stay at the control centers. We'll send help."

* * *

Cutter handed the photograph back to Matthews.

"What can we do to make sure it's dead?"

"Destroy the planet."

Cutter shook his head. "Sir," he said earnestly, "a whole planet? I don't want to seem chicken-livered, but couldn't we merely find the remains of the scout ship and blast everything within a hundred-mile radius of it?"

Matthews snapped a desk switch and studied a three-dimensional stellar chart to one side of his desk. Scattered sparsely among the stars were pale blue spheres. Matthews shone a pointer of light that touched one of the spheres.

"This is our nearest base." He moved the pointer further out. "About here we will have our roving patrols. From here on out to the trouble spot will take at least twenty days, and that's assuming we're fortunate."

"Sir, how far could a man in that condition go in twenty days?"

Matthews, frowning, studied the chart. He looked back at the photographs.

Cutter said earnestly, "Sir, some day we'll learn how to kill these creatures just as we kill ordinary germs. But will we ever learn to put a planet back together? I've been out on the frontier, and, sir, I know how badly we need every Class A planet we can get."

Matthews, his eyes narrowed, studied the photograph, looked up, and cleared his throat.

* * *

The creature was more comfortable now, free of the strain of single-handed effort it had felt before.

"Better?" said the voice.

"Much better. I think we have everything under control now. It's much easier with a team."

"As soon as you can, we want you to strengthen the musculature of the host's chest and forelimbs. We are going to move you, and you will have to help."

"No, not yet. The resources of this body are stretched almost to the limit. Before we can accomplish anything else, we have to regenerate the lower portions of the assimilative tract. And there are a number of organs we have to regenerate as soon as possible. For lack of their internal secretions there is an

overall loss of tone and an accumulating imbalance that is going to make a great deal of trouble later on."

"There won't be any later on unless we act promptly now. The data we've received from the host's information banks shows that great precautions have been taken by this race's ultimate controlling mechanism to prevent loss of control of even a single *one* of its units. Everything that has happened thus far is known to this controlling mechanism. The control mechanism must know that the initial attempt to destroy this unit failed. Its reactions in that first attempt were fast and decisive. Can we expect anything less now?"

There was a moment's hesitation, then the reluctant reply.

"You're right. I'll take care of it at once."

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Matthews turned the photograph over, and shook his head.

"In twenty days, we don't know what will happen out there. The only way to destroy the creature, and *know* that we've destroyed it, is to destroy the whole planet."

"Sir, a man in that condition won't go anywhere in a hurry. Even assuming the most fantastically rapid healing, there are bound to be natural obstacles to travel. We *can't* destroy the whole planet merely for the purpose of getting certainty to the last decimal place."

Matthews' eyes glinted. "What would you do?"

"Blast the site and everything for a hundred miles around, *after* getting complete pictures of the whole region from overhead. If the ship, and the remains of the suit and body were still there, I'd call it a day. If the body was gone, I'd roast everything within a fifteen-hundred mile radius. I'd make sure that the ship and the suit were completely destroyed. Pulverized. Burned to dust and the dust scattered. Then I'd ring the planet with satellite planet-busters, and if anything came up off it, *then* I'd destroy the planet, and with it the thing that was on its way up. And, sir, I'd think I had assurance triply sure, compounded, and cubed. *And* we'd still have the planet for use later on."

Matthews stroked his chin.

Cutter said, "Sir, we *need* planets."

Matthews nodded. "All right. There's a fleet being formed off Sental II for the purpose of dealing with all of these planets. I would have said, 'Destroy the lot of them.' Perhaps your way is better. There seems to be very little risk."

"Sir, so far as I can see, there's *no* risk."

"There is, because we're dealing with the unknown. You don't lay down rules to govern the unknown. You only try to confine it within certain borders. You do this by controlling certain elements the unknown has in common with familiar things."

Cutter nodded. "Yes, sir. In this case, the unknown being material, and thus subject to the law of gravitation, this whatever-it-is can't get off the planet without some means of transportation. And can't move body, suit, or ship without showing it."

"Yes," said Matthews. "So it seems. But I am going to modify your plan to be on the safe side. If, on any of these planets, you find the body or its remnants are not there, you will destroy the entire planet."

Cutter drew a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"Sentel II," said Matthews, "is on a short direct subspace route from here. You can be there by the time the fleet is formed and ready. From there out, it's all problematical. You shouldn't hit any impassable radiation barrier in that direction, but all we know about the region comes from the reports of scouts. Who approached it from a different direction."

"I'm sure we can make it with no trouble, sir. We only hit serious radiation barriers when we try to go outward, toward the rim of the galaxy, or if we go too far laterally. The barriers ease out, like the walls of a funnel, as we move in toward the center. This region is almost directly inward."

Matthews nodded. "I'll wish you good luck, in any case. Your orders will be ready shortly. If, while you're here, there's any message you want to send down to anyone on Earth—"

Cutter grinned. "There is. I'd like a solido hookup."

"Easy to arrange." Matthews picked up one of the several phones. A few moments later Cutter shook hands, saluted, and left the room.

Matthews put the grim stack of ten by twelve color photos back in the wall cabinet by his desk, hit a button marked "microfilm," and another marked "file," and sat down again at his desk.

There was a thud and a click from the cabinet, then the office was quiet. Matthews put his hands to his temples, frowning.

He had a headache, and a faint, sick, queasy feeling.

He looked around the room depressed at the regulation gray he had seen hundreds of times before, with no reaction.

Something was wrong, he told himself.

But what?

* * *

The thing was sick.

Clinging to the centers of control, holding itself in phase against the growing fatigue, it slammed the nerve impulses down the long tracts, conscious of their inevitable decay and automatic amplification by the built-in mechanisms of the captured body. But the resistance was rising steadily. It grew progressively harder to create the necessary tension to initiate the electrochemical process that ended in holding the burned hands clenched and the large muscles of the arms tightened. The chemical stocks of the body were badly depleted, and poisons were accumulating. Strong talons clamped the sides of the body from outside in a viselike grip that interfered with respiration, and yet was not enough in itself to give full support, or allow a moment's rest. From some uncaptured stronghold in the labyrinth of interconnected neurons that was the creature's brain came the faint but insistent hypnotically regular command ordering the dissolution of the body's cells, and this command must be blocked while the need to override the fatigue of the efferent nerve channels rose to a level that required every bit of conscious attention merely to maintain the grip of weakening muscles. And now, somehow, one of the large nucleated free-moving cells found its way into this hidden place, and with a detectable sensation like a growl of content forthwith set about its grisly work of dismemberment.

There was nothing to do now but scream for help, and with every impulse hurled along fast-clogging nerve-channels, the scream went out. Each time it was a little weaker.

"It's all right," came the answer. "You're almost there. Just a little longer. Hang on. We'll have help to you in a moment."

* * *

Brigadier General Cutter had never felt better. He had his memory of Dione's arms around his neck, and when he thought about it he could feel her lips tight against his, and her tantalizing perfume rising to his nostrils and almost drowning him in its mere memory. He had, in addition, a fully independent command, and a mission that could not have been at the same time more simple or more ominously important. Perform it successfully, as no one with all his wits could fail to do, and he would have commendation, promotion, and a certain ineradicable increase in professional stature. Let the news leak out that he had blocked an order to *destroy* three Class A planets, and he would have political backing all along the frontier. To add to this perfection, he had the ultimate in good fortune, a fleet navigator who had struck a lucky subspace route that knocked six days off the original estimate, making it so much the more likely that he could let this first planet off with a minimal dose. That would look better yet to every frontier colonist who learned of it. And all this, in turn, compounded his original source of ecstasy. Could Dione, already weakening to the pleas of a mere brigadier general, withstand the demands of a major general with the luster of glory on his name and with the whole body of border senators in his pocket? No, the prospective major-general told himself, she could not. His ambition, growing cramped in the constricted bottleneck below the ultimate top levels of command, revived with a rush. The star-flecked dreams of youth returned, and he saw himself with hand upraised, in solitary splendor. The words of the oath of the highest office open to any human in the known universe echoed in his ears, and through his veins there flowed like wine the intoxication of power.

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The creature was conscious of misery, despair, and a situation inside the captured body that bordered on chaos. He was out of phase with the final elements of the body's control centers, but he had still a vague remembered awareness of up-and-down motion, and of the voice soothing him:

". . . almost made it. Close enough. All that has to be done now is to draw the body through a short stretch of water and up onto the land. We can do this without your help. Once on land, you'll be all right, and we've arranged for you to get a good deal more help. All we should lose in the process is the transporter. That's going irreversible already, but we should be able to get everyone out . . . There . . . You're on land. Safe."

And that was all he was conscious of for a long long time.

When at last he felt the first flicker of awakening consciousness, the situation was far different. At first, he found that he was unable to reorient himself, and he experienced a moment of panic before he discovered that the control centers of the captured host organism had slightly changed phase. A first cautious contact gave him an entirely different body-sense than what he had expected. Cautiously, he tried again.

This time he realized what had happened. The sensations of pain that he was trying to damp down were no longer coming through. In their place was an awareness of physical good order. He opened the visual receptors of the organism.

Abruptly he realized that he was sitting on a beach, looking at long flat waves rushing up the sand. He had a sense of well-being, aliveness, and awareness, that brought him to his feet in a rush. Unthinking, he sprinted down the beach, whirled, paused, and closed his eyes.

With an effort, he shifted himself slightly out of phase, put the organism in a sitting position, and considered what had just happened.

The voice reached him, amused: "What do you think?"

"This is the best yet. It responds beautifully." There was a moment of astonishment. "The lower limbs have been regenerated!"

"The entire organism has been gone over. We've done a lot of work, believe me. There are parts of the organism that apparently never were properly developed. There were organs partially clogged with poisons, evidences of mistreatment and malnutrition, energy directed along the wrong nerve tracts, habitual enforcement of incorrect or distorted functions. You have to remember that this organism was just a cell in a much larger group organism, and when the functions of that larger organism demanded it, this comparatively small cell was grossly distorted to fit the larger functions. Without that pressure, we've been able to put it into better condition than it's ever been in before."

"It must have taken a great many of us to do this."

"Yes, at first. But most of the work was self-maintaining once we had it properly started. You should have no trouble managing it all yourself, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"The roving nucleated cells. We've had a great deal of irritating interference from them."

"Could we wipe them out?"

"Probably. But they serve a useful function in keeping down other troublesome organisms. They're not really dangerous to us unless we're in weak condition, or have to stay still in some exposed location. We'll have to try to exist with them, until we can find some better way."

"In that case, I don't want to run this organism alone."

"You won't have to, for now. You'll only have to do that if you should have to give up your companions in taking over other organisms."

That was the last the voice had to say for the moment, and he found himself speculating on it. Everything habitable on the planet was already occupied by his kind. What other organisms were there to take over?

* * *

Brigadier General Cutter studied the staff summaries, looking for the words he wanted to find. The scout ship was "definitely located." That was good. The suit was "apparently located." That was understandable, considering the violent explosion that had partially ripped the suit apart. Good enough, anyway. But the body of the stellar scout was "uncertainly located, possibly owing to complex biological degenerative changes."

What the devil did *that* mean?

Cutter picked up a phone. "Rodner?"

"Sir?"

"What's this on the body? Is it found, or isn't it?"

"We're not certain about that, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, there's been a good deal of violence down there. And, of course, exposure. It's an alien planet. We don't know just what the decay bacteria on the planet can do."

Cutter scowled at the phone.

"I gathered that much from your report."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Sir?"

"So what?" said Cutter angrily. "What about the exposure and decay? What about the bacteria?"

"That's precisely it, sir. We don't know."

"Don't know *what*?"

"Their effects, sir."

"So?"

The voice was cool. "Well, of course, therefore we just can't say."

Cutter held the phone out and looked at it. He put it back to his head and said, "Are you working on anything right now that can't wait?"

"N-No, sir."

"Then come to my office and we'll talk this thing over."

Cutter jammed the phone back in its cradle, and growled under his breath.

The door opened and a tall, slender, rather sensitive-looking staff officer stepped in. Cutter pinned him with his gaze.

"Now, then, what's this about the bacteria and all the rest of it?"

"Sir? Just what I told you."

"Tell it again."

The officer said patiently, "Owing to the time-lag prior to examination and to the uncertain effects of bacterial action on the planet, we find it impossible to state definitely whether or not the remains we have located are truly the remains of the stellar scout, Anthony Conger."

Cutter smiled and nodded his head. "Very good. Now, Rodner, let's just look over that statement. And before we do that, let's consider, if you don't mind, a few other aspects of this. Shall we? First of all, you have, if I remember correctly, a splendid record in your specialty, and it was this that gained you a temporary commission as major when you were inducted. This is correct, is it not, Rodner?"

The staff officer, watching him with an incredulous look, stammered, "Yes. Yes, that's true, I believe."

"Well, well," Cutter stood up, beaming paternally. "*Major* Rodner. It sounds nice, doesn't it? Much better than, say Pvt. Rodner, or PFC Rodner, or, maybe, T/3 Rodner. Doesn't it?"

The hapless staff officer opened his mouth, shut it, and swallowed. As if despite himself, his mouth opened up again. "Yes, sir."

"Good," said Cutter. The paternal look vanished. "The trouble with temporary rank is, you can lose it anytime. You need to make your superiors happy if you want to keep it. I will now ask you a question: *What do you know about the condition of the stellar scout's body down on that planet?*"

"Sir," said the staff officer desperately, "we have located several sizable masses of proto . . . that is, body tissue—"

"I know what protoplasm is," the general grated.

"We've found several sizable masses of protoplasm, and have definitely identified badly burned human body tissue in some of these masses. These tissue samples are apparently from the lower parts of the body. The remains of the upper part of the body is more thoroughly decomposed—"

"That's natural, isn't it? Wouldn't the charring of the lower parts of the body slow down decay?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the upper part of the body, being exposed to the elements, and there being nothing whatever to slow down decay—that *would* be more likely to be affected by the local decay bacteria, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that would account for unusual chemical substances in the body, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir. To a degree."

"Then what's the problem? And you'd better give me a straight answer."

"There are decay products that couldn't have been derived from normal body chemicals. There is hair that appears to be materially unaffected by exposure, and yet its chemical structure does not correspond to that of human hair. Photographs of the body show, from the purely physical standpoint of appearance, a perfectly normal picture, considering the circumstances. Chemical analysis shows some things normal, and some things abnormal. We're handicapped in working out a definite answer because we can't work on the body at close range. We have to use servo-dissectors and analyzers, and a variety of remote-control techniques that become awkward when the situation is so far from routine."

Cutter scowled. "And the net result is that the outward appearance of the body is all right, but the chemical structure is wrong?"

"Well, not entirely wrong. But—"

"Ninety per cent wrong?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Fifty per cent?"

"If you mean, are fifty per cent of the compounds of the body, and of the decay products, wrong. No, sir. Not that many."

"How many?"

"I would say . . . oh . . . two per cent, roughly."

"Well, then . . . two per cent. That isn't much. After all, we're dealing with a strange planet."

"Yes, sir." The staff officer's face showed signs of a struggle for words. "But this two per cent happens to be next to impossible for us to explain on any rational basis."

"Obviously. You don't know everything about the planet."

"We can allow for wide differences in some directions, but not others. For instance, we recognize a human face as human despite variations in height of brow, prominence of cheekbones, width of skull, spacing of eyes, size of nostrils, skin, eyes, and hair color, freckling, beard growth—there can be wide variations in these things, and they aren't critical. We know we're dealing with genuine human characteristics, and there's no special effect of dealing with anything alien."

Cutter nodded. "Well, then—What's the difficulty?"

"Well—Suppose someone walks in with everything perfectly normal except he has a growth of beard across the forehead, and his nose on upside down? Then what?"

Cutter's heart seemed to skip a beat. "You didn't mention—"

The staff officer looked as if he felt sorry for Cutter. "Sir, that's just a comparison. The anomaly is on the chemical level. But, believe me, it's just that bad."

Cutter nodded. "All right. You've given me a straight explanation. That's what I want. Now get out."

The major hesitated, then saluted hurriedly, and went out.

Cutter blew out his breath. Matthews' words echoed in his ears: "If, on any of these planets, you find the body or its remnants are not there, you will destroy the entire planet."

That was an order. It was recorded on tape in Matthews' files, and a copy of the tape had been forwarded to Cutter for his own files, and clipped to the packet containing his written orders.

Whether or not he, Cutter, should destroy this planet depended on how literally he interpreted his orders, and on a purely technical guess as to whether the body was or was not there. And he was not personally qualified to make the guess.

Cutter's gaze fell on his desk solido of Dione. As he watched, she seemed to smile up at him, arms stretched out.

With an effort, Cutter picked up the staff summary, glanced from it to the solido, and wavered.

* * *

The powers of the captured body, once relieved of accumulations of poisons and self-defeating nerve-currents, were intriguing. He slowed the body, stopped, whirled, and glanced back at the ground he'd covered in a brief spurt. Not bad. He glanced up, crouched, sprang, caught the limb of a low weathered tree, and hauled himself up into the knobby branches.

The voice spoke in his head. "A remarkably versatile organism. But hadn't you better go slow at first?"

"No need. The control-information for every single move I've made is coded and stored away in one section or another of the creature's brain. All I do is just let it take over. Watch."

He glanced around.

The tree grew at the edge of a deep rocky inlet. Briefly, he studied the clear water, then arced out from the tree, split the water cleanly, and popped to the surface, aware of a grin that expressed his sense of well-being perfectly.

The voice was reproving. "If you'd gone just a little bit to one side, you'd have split the creature's skull."

"The point is, I didn't go that little bit to one side. The control mechanisms are extremely accurate, once freed of the cumulative poisons and allowed to function properly. I think basically this is a much more finely-controlled organism than any of our others. The beauty of it is, most of the control is automatic. I don't always know just what the mechanism will do, but I have a sense of *readiness*. For instance, when I looked out of the tree at the water, if I looked beyond the rock, I had a feeling of unease and danger. Thus I knew the body could not clear the rock. When I looked at the water in front of the rock, again I had the feeling—this time more a sense of cramping. A little analysis showed that the body would either strike the bottom, because of too steep a dive, or strike the rock, because of too shallow a dive. There was no way to avoid one of these difficulties without running into the other. When I looked to the side, however, there was a feeling of perfect ease and readiness. There was really no need to calculate anything. It was all done by a process of comparison with stored data."

"Then you are ready to test the body against our others?"

"I'm ready, of course. But I don't think there'll be much I need to do except to keep the internal processes and the functioning mechanism of the body in proper condition, and perhaps occasionally make a selection between alternatives. Its operation seems to be largely automatic."

"In that case, we might as well start. We hope to have more specimens before too long, for comparison."

"How so?"

"Several remote-controlled vehicles have come down to examine the remains of the exoskeleton and the host's body. Of course, we've heavily infiltrated the vehicles, in the samples of decomposing body tissue. Thanks to the information we have from previously scanning your host's brain, we've been able to locate the circuits which control the vehicles. They really aren't so much different from nerve circuits, basically."

"What are you going to do?"

"Corrode and wear away a section of a separate circuit designed to trigger an explosion to destroy the vehicles. This is nearly done. Then, when they can't strike back at us by destroying the vehicles, we'll take over the vehicles. They are driven by mechanisms controlled by small motors, and these are controlled in turn by plungers actuated by"—there was a minute pause—"solenoids. Movement of the six sets of plungers determines the eventual movement of the vehicles. The solenoids are small, and the plungers light. All we need do is cut the normal control circuit, and actuate the plungers mechanically."

"That will warn them."

"Of course. We will do this only if they send the signal to destroy the remote-control vehicles. But they have vacillated for some time. The vehicles were ridiculously easy to infiltrate. The sham body we constructed was so closely accurate we doubt they can detect the difference. If they do attempt to destroy the vehicles, we will simply send them up at the larger vehicles off-planet and try to manage just one collision. All we need is to get just one of us inside any one of those ships. And now, if you are ready for the test—"

"I'm ready."

* * *

Brigadier General Cutter strode back across the room, and slammed the staff summary onto the floor in the corner. No matter how he approached the problem, it changed form before his eyes, and the solution he had just arrived at seemed wrong.

The simple, obvious solution was to say, "Destroy the planet." For justification, he could point to his orders, and to the indecisive staff report. But that was just the trouble. The staff report *was* indecisive. Angrily, Cutter turned to the photographs of the body. Certainly, that hideous shambles *looked* authentic. He glanced at the detailed dissection and analysis report. The dissection reports disclosed everything normal, considering the circumstances. Only the chemical structure seemed anomalous, and these anomalies were few and small. It took a specific type of biochemical training to begin to appreciate them.

Cutter shook his head. On the strength of these few submicroscopic differences, he was supposed to destroy the planet. And if he *did* destroy the planet, it would, inevitably, raise an outcry along the whole frontier. Inevitably, there would be an investigation. And this was the evidence he would have to present to justify his case for destroying the planet. He could see himself in the packed Senate chamber, a microphone shoved up to his mouth, a tri-di camera staring him in the face, the question put to him gently, but inescapably:

"And you say, general, your orders were to destroy the planet, if the scout's body was not there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, general, I ask you to look at this photograph. Have you seen this photograph before?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, I have."

"May I ask you, what is this a photograph *of*?"

And there he was. Hung up. What could he say? He could answer the question in different ways:

"Senator, that is the body of the stellar scout."

"Now, general, this photograph was taken on the planet you destroyed, was it not? It was taken just before you issued your famous command to destroy the whole planet, was it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your orders were to destroy the planet *if the body of the stellar scout was not there*?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yet you just said, *this is a photograph of the body*? Then the body was *there*, was it not? You don't argue, do you, that you took a photograph of something that wasn't there?"

And he was condemned out of his own mouth. On the other hand, he could answer differently. He could say:

"Senator, that is an *imitation* body, constructed by an alien organism."

"It is—what? What was that again?"

"That is not the body of the stellar scout. That is an imitation body constructed to mislead us."

"It is? Why, general, it's a badly decomposed body, but it looks human to me. Here, show me anything here that's nonhuman. Does it have six or seven fingers? I don't see anything. Show me."

"It isn't a question of appearance, senator. Obviously, a sham would be ineffective if the appearance were inaccurate. It is a question of the chemical structure of the body."

"General, when I look at you to see if you're human, I don't have to cut you up and run samples of you through a test tube, do I?"

Laughter in the chambers.

"No, senator, but if you found my body, ran it through a test tube, and discovered it was made of green cheese, you'd be a little suspicious, wouldn't you?"

"Well—That's a point, I have to admit, general. But I have here this sheaf of papers showing the results of anatomical and chemical examination. The anatomical examination showed perfect normality."

"The body was in a state of considerable decomposition."

"Yes, but if this had been simply a matter of scraping together a mass of material and stamping it into an outward human semblance—I'm thinking of that green cheese, general, that you're made of—then the anatomical examination would certainly have shown it, would it not?"

"Yes, sir. But what we're up against works more subtly than that."

"All right. I'm open-minded. But we find nothing abnormal about the appearance of the body. Nothing an ordinary human would notice. And we cut it up and find nothing abnormal about the structure of it. If any doctor had been called to carry out a post-mortem, it would have seemed like a perfectly human body to him. Any anatomist would think it was a human body. *You* say it was the chemical structure. I see here in this report a long complicated series of analyses. It looks to me as if there are only a few substances out of line. Here, point out to me a few of these abnormalities."

"Well, here, senator, in the hair, and here, in the nails—"

"I see. Yes, and I also know that this body was decomposing, on a strange planet, that there are natural variations both in structure and in chemical balance among perfectly ordinary human individuals, and that your orders were to destroy the planet *if the body of the scout wasn't there*. Did your orders say, "Destroy the planet if the scout's fingernails aren't up to specifications?"

"No, sir. But—"

"*But that's what you did, isn't it? You did destroy the planet, didn't you? Because these few chemical compounds didn't happen to be just the way you wanted? Answer the question!*"

"Yes, sir. Because the implications of those few chemical compounds—"

"Implications of the chemical compounds," mimicked the senator. "Let's think of the implications of your actions, for a change. Do you know that planet would ultimately have supported *three billion human beings*? Do you know you blasted out of existence the homes and futures of three billion people—for a set of fingernails? Where will these people go? Their world is destroyed! *You* destroyed it! And if you destroy the future, the possibility of existence, of a human being, how is that different from destroying the human being himself? I indict you, general, for the destruction, the murder of three billion colonists and their descendents, down through the mists of time, they and their children and their children's children, in uncountable multitudes, that can never exist, that have been blotted out of existence, because *you* didn't

like a man's fingernails!"

Cutter, drenched in perspiration, looked at the phone resting on his desk, that he could pick up very easily to cause the destruction of the planet and the ending of all doubt. He saw the phone through a mental haze of imaginary shouting jeering people, senators and spectators, their accusing fingers pointed at him, the bright lights dazzling him, his perspiring features reproduced in a billion homes.

"No," he said. "I can't do it. It isn't right. Nobody can ask me to do that."

Driven by the nightmare generated by his own brain, he picked up the phone.

"Sir?" came the waiting voice.

"I want everything within a hundred-mile radius of that scout ship smashed to powder. That's all."

"Yes, sir. About the servo-dissectors, sir—"

"Destroy them," said Cutter shortly.

"Yes, sir."

Cutter hung up. He glanced at the solido of Dione. He looked at it for a long time.

On the other end of the wire, the orders were going out. In one detail, they were different from what Cutter intended. The simple, obvious way to destroy the remote-control devices near the scout ship was simply to leave them where they were. At the center of a hundred-mile radius of destruction, they would be smashed to dust.

But Cutter had only said, "Destroy them." He hadn't specified how. Now the order went out. "Activate the suicide circuits."

Cutter, unaware of this, and seeing an end to his dilemma, began to breathe easily again.

* * *

At Luna I HQ, Lieutenant General Bradley Matthews frowned and leaned back in his chair. He hadn't had again an attack of sickness such as he'd had after Cutter left to make his call to Earth, but he'd had plenty of indigestion. He was having an attack right now, and he asked himself, Why? He frowned. It all dated from that talk with Cutter. He leaned back, scowling, and after a long while, slowly sat up.

He was remembering Cutter's hearty frontier manner, quickly dropped when a little heat was applied. He remembered Cutter's arguments in favor of easy measures to preserve planets for future colonists, and his own reluctant agreement on easy measures, so long as the body of the scout was there.

But there was the cause of his trouble.

Cutter was the wrong man to carry out such orders ruthlessly.

Matthews' indigestion vanished in a sudden burst of anger. His hand shot out and gripped a bright green phone on his desk. He jerked it viciously off its cradle. A voice replied, "Max. Priority." Matthews said, "All traffic outward of Sental III is quarantined, with immediate effect. The direct Sental-Earth subspace route is closed, with immediate effect. Move reserve groups IV, VI, and X forward along the axis Sental-Felis. Halt all traffic moving inward toward Sental, or laterally across the axis Sental-Felis, or breaking from subspace anywhere within range in the region outward of Sental. Attack and destroy without question any traffic which disobeys the halt order. There are no exceptions to the halt and

destroy orders for any circumstances whatever. There is to be no physical contact with any of the halted ships for any reason whatever."

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

Matthews slammed the phone in its cradle, got up, paced the floor, and abruptly snapped on the three-dimensional stellar chart.

* * *

The voice spoke inside its head, almost simultaneously with its own shock:

"WHAT WAS THAT?"

Directly across from it was the grapple, a low armored creature with retractile eyes, four very long snaky limbs that spread out and disappeared in the marsh grass and a large and a small set of powerful pincers at one end. The grapple had two of its snaky limbs bunched and pulled back, three of its eyes were extended on wiry stalks, and the large and the small pincers were poised, open, above the bunched limbs. The pincers snapped shut with a loud *click*. Abruptly the eyes swiveled outward, and the limbs violently unbunched, snaking out in the long marsh grass. The pincers dove out of sight in the grass. Two of the eyes retracted almost out of sight, and the third straightened, to wave stiffly and gently among the stalks of tufted grass. The armored body was motionless, like a low lichened rock among the mossy hummocks.

Suddenly the voice said, "It *had* you!"

"I was careless. This body could have escaped. But I forgot that it had no experience with grapples. No stored recognition patterns or get-away reflexes. It was my fault. I should have used direct control."

"The point is, it *had* you. And yet, you *did* escape!"

There was a brief pause, and this fact sank in, to be followed by blank astonishment. "It must have let go. All I felt was the shock of capture. Then I was free."

"We were in contact with both of you. It didn't let go."

"But—that's impossible."

A faint gliding movement caught his attention. Abruptly he was aware that the low "rock" which was the grapple's body was no longer on the far side of the large mossy mound, but had imperceptibly eased alongside of it. Then the grass rippled in a long wave.

He hit the water with a flat slap. The hard grip at his ankles yanked him feet first through muck and grass. A second limb snaked tight around his chest and waist, pinning his arms to his body. Eyes on wiry stalks arched overhead. A large set of pincers loomed above him.

In a flash he saw in clear detail a section of swamp he'd been looking at a moment before. Something happened so fast he was aware only of a brief vague sensation of gripping something beside and around him to thrust his body in relation to it.

He was standing forty feet from the gray "rock" that was the grapple's armored body. This time he did not remain standing there. With little urging on his part, the body sprang carefully and accurately from hummock to hummock, eyes alert for any gray, rocklike thing anywhere ahead or to the side.

The voice spoke in his head:

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

* * *

Brigadier General Cutter looked at the phone, scowled, and said, "What's that?"

"Sir, the servosurgeon and servoanalytic rockets aren't destroyed. The suicide circuits won't work."

"Why bother with—Oh I see." He frowned.

"Instead, sir, the probes mounting these devices are headed back toward the ship."

"We can't have that," said Cutter. "Put them back down near the scout ship, and blow them up with it."

"Sir, they won't go back down. They don't respond to signal."

Cutter glanced at the solido of Dione. He hesitated possibly a fifth of a second. "Open up with fusion guns. Burn them up."

"Yes, sir."

Cutter held the phone and pressed down the short plastic bar in the phone's cradle. He glanced at the solido of Dione. He let up on the bar, and said, "Missile Electronics."

There was a brief delay.

"Sir?"

"What are the odds that the suicide circuits on the servo-equipped probes we set down on that planet would refuse to obey the trigger signal?"

"Sir? Just about zero."

"And what chance is there that the probes would then head up on their own and start for the ships?"

"Impossible, sir. Unless someone down there got into the circuits and altered them. Or, possibly, if they had a very small sensitive remote-control tool, and got it into the C-box."

"What's in there?"

"Sir, I'm forbidden by regulations to discuss it. But if a very sensitive complex tool, capable of exerting a small pressure in the right directions, was somehow gotten in there, the probe could be remote-flown from outside."

"Would this be hard?"

"It would be fantastically complicated. The tool would have to be collapsible, capable of being worked in through a narrow channel, and remote-controlled somehow to exert pressure in the right directions. But that's how it could be done."

Cutter nodded. "Thank you."

He put the phone in its cradle, and sat staring at the staff reports.

It stopped the swift running of the body across the marsh, and looked back toward the grapple. Only a

bit of the gray body was visible, blending with the low hummocks of moss and clumps of marsh grass.

This time, the shock of capture and escape was more violent. He could still feel the grip of the tight contractile arms at waist and ankles. He could still see the eyes on stalks against the sky, and poised just above him, the powerful pincers. His own reflexive fear of the pain the grapple could inflict on his host, and through the nerves of his host, on him, was compounded by the host body's own reaction—a violent pumping of blood and rapid respiration that built up the sensation of fear. Angrily, he thrust these feelings aside, and concentrated instead on the memory of his escape.

Something had happened. But what? Carefully he scanned the body's central nervous system, seeking the faint traces that would reveal patterns of nerve connections set up briefly, used for a bare instant, then lost again. This failing, he groped to recover the memory of what had happened. Holding the other activities of the brain to a bare quiet minimum, gradually he recovered the memory. Working from the memory, he strove to gain a conscious knowledge of whatever it was that had enabled him to get away from the grapple.

Bit by bit, it became clearer, and as he remembered, he carefully traced the nerve paths, trying to locate the exact form and sequence of nerve currents that had set the process in action.

After a long silence, the voice said, "You have it. That's what happened."

"But will it work if I initiate the process consciously?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Try it and see."

He hesitated.

"I'm not quite sure of the right sequence. It seems to me there is some sort of master impulse that comes first, and cuts out interference. But right after that—I don't know."

"Try anyway."

"Yes. But what if—"

"Try." The voice had an urgency that communicated itself to him, and told him that there was more than curiosity behind the demand.

Carefully, trying to follow the remembered pattern, he sent out the nerve impulses.

Cutter held the phone to his ear. "*Completely* destroyed?" he insisted.

"Yes, sir. Flashed to vapor. We got the lot of them in quick succession."

"They were still headed for the ships?"

"Yes, sir."

"We have complete records of the incident?"

"Yes, sir. Beginning to end."

"All right. Carry out your orders to destroy the scout ship and its environs."

"Yes, sir."

Cutter put the phone in its cradle and got up. He had a hard problem to work out.

After what had happened so far, he was going to have to destroy the planet. There was no way out of that. He would *have* to destroy the planet. After his superiors saw the record of what had happened here, they would crush him if he left without destroying the planet.

But he had to destroy it in such a way that it would look good to the colonists.

He began to pace the floor.

* * *

The initial nerve impulse had gone out correctly, but now instead of finding himself in the plot of tufted grass he had visualized, he was instead swamped with flashes of color, and a sea of unfamiliar verbalizations that washed into his consciousness, drowning him in a flood too great to endure.

Desperately, he choked off the nerve impulses, and the process, whatever it was, faded out entirely, leaving him with a few strings of words that his host's brain belatedly responded to, giving him the thought behind the words:

"I've got to smash this planet. But how to do it and not antagonize the whole frontier?"

And from a deeper level, the thought came through:

". . . I ought to destroy it now. I ought to destroy it now. I ought to destroy it now . . ."

And from a still deeper level:

"Dione . . . Dione . . ."

Puzzled, very carefully, he permitted the nerve currents to flow again.

And he picked up the welter of verbalizations. But this time he found he was able, like a beast of prey following a trail, to sift very carefully through the confusion for the familiar scent he was tracking.

* * *

Cutter was standing still, scowling. For a moment, he had completely lost track of his own thoughts. He saw Dione's *solido*, and was conscious of a sudden, almost embarrassing rush of emotion. An instant later, he was aware of the desperate importance of destroying this planet before it was too late. He reached for the phone, and paused, remembering all the irksome complications that would follow the destruction of the planet.

He wavered, seeing the angry colonists petitioning their representatives, and their representatives calling him and grilling him on his thoughts, purposes, intents, and rational justifications. And it would all take place in a fantastic publicity display that could turn in any direction at all, and leave him suddenly a has-been as a result of one wrong answer in a situation where the basic structure of right and wrong was hidden like a reef till he either hit it and was wrecked, or accidentally came through the unseen channel and suddenly realized with surprise that the ordeal was over.

But if he didn't do it, if he *didn't* destroy the planet—

Suddenly exasperated beyond enduring, by all the pros, cons, and imponderables, Cutter suddenly threw the whole mass of complications out of his mind.

The solido of Dione caught his eye, lush, seductive, demanding.

Demanding?

Cutter blinked, studying the construction of the woman's jaw.

His gaze traveled the curving length of the lush body, came back to the jaw, flicked up to study the shrewd eyes and empty face.

He spat an ugly curse, knocked the solido off the desk, cast a brief glance at the staff report, and picked up a phone.

"Sir?"

"Check out four subnuclear triggers—"

"Sir, we've got half-a-dozen checked out and ready to go. It's SOP on this category mission."

"You've also got suitable target areas selected, to destroy the planet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Destroy the planet."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

The host's brain interpreted the order, but there was a lapse of time before the full meaning came through. Even then he wasn't certain that this was what it actually meant.

The voice was not so hesitant:

"You're picking up the thought of the commander of a space fleet with the power to destroy this planet. You've got to stop him!"

"But I can't! How could I—"

"We've had time to analyze the process you've followed. You are using nerve paths that the host creatures rarely ever use, and are hardly aware exist. Ordinarily, a great deal of training would be necessary, just to develop the nerve tracts, and special organs involved. But in rebuilding this body, we repaired damage resulting from neglect and disuse as well as injury. We didn't know where to stop, so we evidently developed certain organs that are still normally in process of evolutionary development. You've used these twice to escape destruction. *Now you've got to do it again.*"

"I don't know what to do!"

"The escape mechanism seems to operate when you visualize clearly the place to which you desire to go."

"But if the *whole planet* is to be destroyed—"

"Before you received the auditory sensations a moment ago, there were *visual* sensations. If you could filter out all the distracting sensations, and concentrate on *one clear visual picture*—"

"Yes," he said suddenly. "I see."

"Can you do it?"

"I'll try."

Once again, he let the nerve currents flow, and this time he struggled to recover the flashes of bright color he had ignored before. At first, there was no visual sensation at all. But as he carefully varied the current, there was a brief glimpse of gray, and he concentrated on it intently.

* * *

Brigadier General Cutter was pacing the floor, cursing the vacillation that had led him to waver and debate with himself when the only thing to do was obvious.

The basic cause of his trouble looked appealingly up at him from the floor, arms outstretched. Cutter booted the solido across the room, and felt a vicious satisfaction as it smashed into the bulkhead.

He felt a brief wave of dizziness. His vision nearly blanked out. He caught the desk for support, and then the phone was ringing.

By habit, he groped for it, and held it to his ear.

"Sir, the subnuclear triggers have impacted and fired."

"The planet is destroyed?"

There was an instant's hesitation at this question, then the dutiful answer, "Yes, sir. Certainly."

"Good."

Cutter hung up.

He told himself that he should have felt relief at that comment. But he didn't.

The spell of dizziness had passed away.

Cutter looked up.

* * *

With the effort to control the nerve currents, and to focus precisely on the gray visual image, had come a desperate sense of urgency. He had lost consciousness of everything else in the effort to define that fuzzy image. And when he had defined it, when he saw it clearly, there was a brief moment of unbearable intensity, and then—a sense of relief.

He was standing in a gray-walled room, looking at a man—a host organism just like his own—replace a black plastic "phone" in its black plastic "cradle."

The man looked up—and stared.

* * *

Cutter saw the naked figure, its appearance godlike in the definition of massive muscles and the healthy glow of smooth skin. For an instant, Cutter was unable to move.

The figure stepped forward and clasped him by both wrists.

There was a sharp, piercing pain in Cutter's forearms.

Suddenly Cutter jerked back from the desk, and tried to wrench his hands loose.

The figure on the other side of the desk smiled, leaned forward, and rested its weight heavily on the pinned wrists.

Cutter tried to knock the phones from the desk. He tried to butt the massive figure that gripped him. The silent struggle went on.

Abruptly, Cutter recovered from his shock.

He sucked in a deep breath, to shout at the top of his lungs.

Sight and sound began to fade. He felt a brief dizziness.

The godlike figure stood over the slumped general, looked around the room thoughtfully—and then vanished.

* * *

He was lonely.

The voice, a manifestation of a whole planet taken over and controlled by his kind, was gone. Wiped out. But it would speak again, in time, if he could spread his kind throughout the ships of this fleet. To do that, he had, he found, to carefully scan the thoughts that came to him, find some that he could identify as coming from one of the nearby ships, focus intensely on the visual sensations accompanying the thought, and find a host organism that was alone. Then he need only restrict his attention to the visual sensations, and when there was that undefinable moment of discontinuity, he found himself physically close to the new host organism, which he seized by arm or throat long enough to pass one or two of his kind, and then he pinned the host organism till the original consciousness of the host lost the struggle for control.

Then he moved on.

Soon he had a host organism on each ship of the fleet.

Unfortunately, not all of the hosts were in controlling positions on their individual ships. To get at these particular hosts required a delay while the reproductive process created new master organisms. But the delay was not important. His kind had gained control of the chief host organism, and that was what *was* important.

* * *

The body of Brigadier General Cutter moved at the desk, straightened, and looked around. Two of the phones were ringing. Cutter's hand picked up one of them. There was a moment of listening.

"Yes," said Cutter's voice. "We will check both of those planets. There's no reason whatever for a change of plan. And then, when we're through—"

"Then we'll head back to Earth."

Lieutenant General Bradley Matthews, the three comets of his rank glinting at his lapel, looked at the incomplete transmission that had just come in:

"LANDING ON FELIS IV TIME"

Matthews looked up at the communications officer.

"This is all that came in?"

"There was a lot of gibberish preceding it, sir. The message ended abruptly at the word 'time.'"

"Let's see the gibberish."

"Sir?"

"The meaningless part of the message. Where is it?"

The communications officer stared at him, then saluted and left the room in a rush.

Matthews looked back at the message.

"LANDING ON FELIS IV TIME"

* * *

The voice was back.

Not quite the same voice.

Not, perhaps the voice of a brother, but the voice at least of a cousin. Still, it was the voice. The voice that told him he was not alone in a hostile universe, but immersed in the affairs of his own kind. The voice that told him he was no longer one of a little band of lonely explorers, but had the resources of a civilization at his back.

To the eye and mind of the host organism, the planet was commonplace. To him, conscious of the ruling species that controlled all the diverse life forms, the planet was home.

When he left, he intended to take home with him.

* * *

"There it is, sir," said the communications officer. "That's an exact copy of the original."

Matthews studied the sheet of paper:

AZAZRGHORABNLOKDLDM SARTEEDQHMF AEQNLARNLDAJHMCANEACHRDZRDANQ
A

Matthews glanced down the paper. The jumble of letters went on for better than two dozen lines, and it all looked about the same.

"Just gibberish, sir," said the communications officer, frowning uneasily at the paper.

Matthews' attention was caught by the first four letters, "AZAZ." The first and last letters of the alphabet. Idly, he wrote out the alphabet, and below it, the alphabet reversed. The A and Z were now opposite each other at the beginning and end, so that when he glanced over the paired alphabets counterclockwise, the letters at the two ends read "AZAZ."

"Sir," said the communications officer, "if anyone had wanted to send us a message, he could have used the standard code."

"Yes, but what if hadn't wanted the people around him to know what he was saying? Suppose he just wanted them to think he was sending . . . say . . . a test transmission?"

"Well—"

Matthews felt more and more certain he was right. Ignoring the communications officer, he substituted the letters of his paired alphabets, and wrote:

ITSJIWYMOJPWOW

The communications officer cleared his throat.

Matthews frowned at the paper. "IT" was encouraging. "IT'S" was all right. But what to do with "JIWYMOJPWOW"

Matthews became conscious of the amount of time that could go down the hole while he wrestled with this.

He glanced up at the communications officer, saw the I-told-you-so look on his face, and suddenly remembered that rank *has* its privileges.

"Get to work on this," said Matthews briskly, "and decipher it. I'm inclined to think it's a substitution cipher of some kind. And demand an explanation of that 'Landing on Felis IV' message that came with it."

The communications officer glanced at the sheet of gibberish, looked blank, said "Yes, sir," saluted, and went out, leaving the copy on Matthews' desk.

Matthews shoved it to one side, and tried to consider other matters. A landing on Felis IV would mean—what? That the planet was clearly safe? That Cutter's expedition had somehow already been taken over?. That some unforeseeable emergency had forced the landing?

Frowning, Matthews pulled the sheet of paper over and looked at it:

AZAZRGHORABNLOK . . .

* * *

The voice was still there.

As the fleet moved, the voice moved with it, evidence that the fleet and every creature on it served as transports for an invasion force of the master organism. All that was needed now was a supply of new hosts. To that end, their suspicions must be stifled before they could arise.

A long message went out from the fleet to human headquarters. The main part of the message read:

. . . INFECTED PLANET DESTROYED BY SUBNUCLEAR ATTACK STP OTHER TWO PLANETS HARMLESS STP . . . COMMUNICATOR MALFUNCTION GARBLED MESSAGE WHICH FOLLOWS. . . REMOTE TESTING DEVICES LANDING ON FELIS IV STP PLANET SEEMS OKAY SO FAR BUT TIME WILL TELL STP END OF PRIOR TRANSMISSION STP . . . MISSION COMPLETED STP RETURNING EARTH BY WAY OF SENTAL II IMMEDIATELY STP . . .

* * *

There was a rap at the door, and Matthews looked up.

"Come in."

The communications officer, a sick look on his face, came in and saluted. Wordlessly, he handed

Matthews a sheet of paper that read:

SHIPS COMPLEMENT SUFFERING FROM SOME KIND OF DISEASE OR SPIRIT POSSESSION STP THERE ARE LONG PERIODS OF SILENCE WHEN THEY SEEM TO MERELY INACTIVATE THEIR BODIES STP THEY ACT TOGETHER AS IF GUIDED BY TELEPATHY STP I AM SYSTEMS REPAIR TECHNICIAN IRA BENTLEY STP TWICE THEY HAVE GRABBED ME BY THE WRISTS AND HELD ME TILL DIZZINESS HIT ME STP I THINK I AM IMMUNE STP DO NOT LET THEM RETURN TO EARTH STP

The communications officer cleared his throat. "Simplest form of substitution cipher, sir, with 'A' inserted between the ciphered words."

Matthews picked up the green phone by his desk.

"Max. Priority," said a respectful voice.

"The ships of General Cutter's expedition," said Matthews carefully, "wherever they are found, are to be attacked and destroyed without warning. They are to be attacked the instant they are recognized."

"Yes, sir."

Matthews put the phone down and glanced at the communications officer, who saluted and went out.

Matthews briefly studied the star chart, and learned nothing new from it.

There was little to do now but wait.

* * *

"We have carefully developed the special organs and nerve paths of each of these host-organisms in order to take advantage of undeveloped capabilities of the host. At this distance, and without more practice, we can't be certain, but the reports we have been able to get are not very reassuring. You've had more practice than the rest, so before we finish the approach to Sental II, perhaps you'd better tell us if you agree with the other observations."

* * *

Matthews slid the coil back into his fission gun, gave a quarter turn to lock it, thumbed down the safety, and put the gun back in the open drawer, within easy reach. He returned his attention to the report on his desk, turned the page, and read:

". . . But telepathy is only one of these hypothetical powers. Also mentioned frequently are: precognition—the ability to at least partially foresee coming events; clairvoyance—the ability to see, without use of the visual organs of vision, and unrestricted by physical obstructions; clairaudience—the same type of thing, as applied to hearing; teleportation—the ability to transfer objects, including the body, from one place to another, without visible physical means. There are many others, and also variations of the ones already mentioned.

"Thorough scientific investigation of a variety of persons offering to demonstrate such powers has revealed many instances of fakery, carefully detailed at the end of this report, and also a number of instances in which no fakery was found, so that the investigators were evidently duped.

"Save for a few examples drawn from ancient texts, which have gone through many translations, there appear to have been no instances of commercial or military application of these powers. Indeed, such application is forbidden by various injunctions. This is apparently with the purpose of forestalling in advance any challenge for a demonstration, since such commercial and military utilization could obviously

be highly profitable.

"Some few public demonstrations are reported to have taken place, but these can either be duplicated by physical means, in which case their method of operation is clear, or they plainly must be instances of mass hypnosis, hysteria, and confused memory on the part of the participants.

"Thus, impartial evaluation of the records reveals . . . "

Matthews circled the word "teleportation," and read again: "the ability to transfer objects, including the body, from one place to another, without the use of visible physical means."

He was thinking of Cutter's argument that a planet would be safe if ringed by subnuclear missiles, since—how could anything leave the surface of the planet without the use of physical means?

Matthews glanced at the deciphered message: THEY ACT TOGETHER AS IF GUIDED BY TELEPATHY.

Assuming that some minute creature were able to invade the human body, and having invaded it, could take control of it, vary its form at will, and eventually utilize powers that the human himself scarcely knew existed, how could anyone possibly hope to withstand the creature? All that was needed was to blunder onto a planet occupied by it, and the fight was all over. If such a creature existed anywhere in the universe, what chance was there for humanity? First contact meant automatic defeat. How *could* there be a defense against such creatures? All they had to do was to seize control of one human, and all the rest was just a matter of going through motions.

He picked up the green phone and spoke into it, choosing his words carefully.

* * *

The voice was hopeful. "Were we wrong, then?"

"No," he said uneasily. "Far from it. The instant our ships appear off Sental II, they'll be destroyed."

"Unfortunately, we can't approach Earth without either making a long circuit, or else pioneering some new subspace approach—which might bring us out inside some physical object and destroy us—or else coming in on the known subspace route to near Sental II."

"The other two approaches give our opponents time to prepare. Couldn't we do as you did when you seized control of Cutter and his ships?"

"Not this time. They're in pairs. They're well-armed. No doubt, after a terrific struggle, we would eventually get control of the ships of that fleet—assuming we could move fast enough when we broke out of subspace—but what then? What if *those* ships were destroyed? The controlling entity obviously is in a mood to do just that."

"Then we will have to try to bypass all this. We will have to try something else that these organisms seem to be potentially capable of. We will have to try to boost the power of these nonphysical effects. Possibly we can form a linkage, act together at long range, and strike at the nerve center of the ultimate control organism. But we will have to act quickly. The longer we wait, the more likelihood of some disastrous action that will destroy great numbers of the host, to no purpose."

Lieutenant General Matthews heard the soft step, and looked up. Naked, eyes blazing with tension, the godlike figure moved forward in a blur.

Matthews fired, whirled aside, and fired again, as a second figure appeared at the other side of his desk.

Powerful hands gripped his throat from behind.

His right heel smashed down by reflex action, to snap the small bones of an unprotected foot, at the same instant that the raised muzzle of his gun found the head of the figure behind him.

There was a sudden warmth at his left shoulder, but he was free, firing again and again, as the room around him turned into a slaughterhouse, and then suddenly there was no more opposition.

He felt a wave of dizziness, and aimed the gun at his own head.

The dizziness faded.

There was an intense pain at his chest. A gray curtain seemed to fall before him to cut off his vision.

He struggled in vain to raise the gun and squeeze the trigger.

But a delicate thermal switch cemented to the roof of his mouth took note of the typical fall in body temperature, and faithfully sent out its signal.

In a dazzling flash, the room dissolved.

* * *

"Close," said the voice. "Our losses are nearly forty per cent. But the stubbornness of the opposition makes no ultimate difference, since we won. As we had to win. There really was no way they *could* have won. Now it's just a matter of cleaning up."

The messages began to come in now, calling for help from scattered parts of human-controlled space. These messages told of a spreading nightmarish life form, capable of using humanity as humanity uses beasts of burden. The messages called for help from Earth. The replies were always soothing, and the help quickly forthcoming. Once the help arrived, there were rarely any further complaints. The diminishing flow of messages that came in told the story of an interstellar human civilization sixty per cent, eighty per cent, ninety per cent overcome in a fight carried out without quarter by an overwhelmingly superior opponent.

And then, at last, the messages calling for help came in no longer.

The fight appeared over.

It was then, at the moment of final victory, that the radiation barriers began to vary in strength.

The voice was concerned:

"This oscillation of the radiation barriers has never happened before?"

"No. I find no mention of it in any of the records available to the electronic computers the humans used. No record at all."

"And there is no memory of it. We have lost a comparatively small percentage of them, and the memories of those we have all agree. This has never happened before. We know that we have completely conquered the human race, that we have occupied Earth, its home planet, and that we now control the race and all its resources. We know in addition that there is one more radiation barrier, inward, toward the center of the galaxy, that they had not yet reached on their own. Thus, they occupied a very large box of space. We now control them, and through them the suns and planets within the large volume of space. But we actually know nothing of the nature of these radiation barriers, except that they are fatal. So, how

will we—"

The frequency of the oscillations varied, all around the enclosed volume of space, as if seeking a value at which space itself would respond.

There was the sudden flare of innumerable points of light.

The stars seemed to multiply.

Space lit in a dazzling haze as interstellar dust burned white.

Spaceships flared and burst.

The atmospheres of planets lit in dazzling auroral displays.

The oscillations came to another fine adjustment.

The stars seemed to dull, as their planets blazed in a fiery glow.

The Voice cried out, then died away.

The radiation barrier farthest out, toward the rim of the galaxy, began to move in, toward the center.

* * *

Lieutenant General Bradley Matthews became aware of consciousness. An instant later, he remembered his last physical actions. He felt a grim satisfaction that he had been able to take a few of them with him, and that he had blocked their attempt to capture him. But then, why could he still think? Where was he now?

"Steady," said a quiet feminine voice, very close to him.

Matthews tried to speak, but was unable. He thought, putting the thought in words, "Where am I?"

"In cubicle 68654 tier AA layer AB of the transit ship *Arcturus*."

Matthews thought this over for a long time.

"I don't understand. How did I come to be here?"

"You volunteered on New Mars, made the necessary qualifications trip through a colonization center, discovered the type of planet for which you were best suited, reported for the first trip, and—here you are."

"I volunteered on New Mars, you say?"

"That's right. I have your file at my elbow."

"I seem to have. . . well, lost my memory. Possibly you could tell me a little more."

"Your age is twenty-four. Your field of specialization is densitization, with particular emphasis on cooling control. You received your B.S. at Max Mann University on New Mars, took your M.S. and Ph.D. (elementary) at the same school. You transferred to Interstel on New Earth and took your Ph.D. intermediate and Ph.D. (advanced) at Interstel. While you were preparing to take the qualifying exams for your electorate, there was an incident in which another student molested a girl you were interested in, was severely beaten, and died from the effects. You were accused of manslaughter. Because of lack of

conclusive evidence, an indeterminate verdict was returned against you. You were expelled from Interstel, and for lack of proper educational qualifications, could obtain only menial employment on New Earth. You returned to New Mars, received your Dns.El., *cum laude*, but because the scandal followed you from New Earth, you decided to leave on the next colonization expedition. Word came that an elimination was going to have to be carried out in Nineteen Prime, with an advance of the Border in that region. This meant a great deal of planet-recovery work, with high tax-free pay. You volunteered. Does any of that ring a bell?"

"I'm a little hazy on this idea of 'elimination.' What's that?"

"Well—" the feminine voice hesitated. "Of course, your stat sheet shows you aren't qualified to understand military specs."

"Oh, of course not," replied Matthews. "But it seems to me I should have *some* kind of rough idea."

"You have to take specs outside your own field for granted. When there's an 'elimination,' that means there's planet-forming work afterward. That's absolutely all you need to know."

Matthews' thought came out with what, if he had spoken, would have been a harsh rasping note:

"If you don't know what it means, look it up."

There was a short tense silence, then the click of switches.

A stiff feminine voice said, "Here you are, then. Quote: Owing to the danger of infiltration by quasi-human life forms, mental parasites, telepathic life forms, squoits, class-A complex wave-forms, and others summarized in Table 61 below, external compartmentalization is a necessity. Thus, as the race moves inward, quasi-Earths are seeded well in advance of the actual border regions. Using deep hypnotic techniques and refined methods of planet-forming, the initial generations on these quasi-Earths are led to believe that they have a very long, though somewhat confused, history, usually interrupted by one or more natural catastrophes that have apparently disarranged the 'evidence.' Believing firmly that they are the original and only humans, they proceed to colonize the surrounding region of space.

"If successful, they are in due time made aware of their actual line of descent, and are allowed to join forces with the "elder race." If, however, they are invaded by any of the aforementioned life forms, or others not yet discovered, we learn of the danger through taps on their communications system, observation by molecularized detectors, and other means which need not be detailed here. In such a case, the entire affected compartment of space is subjected to a complex process based on substrate energetics. The result of this process is the elimination of all organized life within the affected compartment.

"Following this "elimination," the nearer energy wall of the compartment is advanced roughly two-thirds of the distance to the farther wall, the necessarily slow and expensive planet-forming work is carried out, a new pseudo-earth is seeded in the farther third of the compartment, the outer energy wall is withdrawn, and the inhabitants of the new pseudo-earth, earnestly believing that they are the original and only humans, proceed to carry forward the work of colonization.

"This roundabout procedure is a necessity, to prevent infiltration into the actual main body of the human race. This process assures us that the infiltration gains access only to a limited portion of the space under human control, and acquires only the comparatively limited knowledge available to the pseudo-earth race. Before the infiltrating conqueror has time to realize that the preconceptions of the humans it has conquered are false, it is wiped out.

"External compartmentalization limits the unavoidable disasters, and enables us, the true, original, Earth race, to continue human colonization of space.'

"End quote," said the prim feminine voice. "And I hope it helps you orientate yourself, though frankly, I *don't* think you can understand it without proper qualification."

Matthews gave a kind of mental grunt, as he slowly absorbed the fact that his whole region of space, with its billions of inhabitants, had been blotted out of existence. At least, he thought grimly, *they* hadn't gotten it.

"What's that?" said the feminine voice, strongly tinged with curiosity.

"I still don't have any clear memory. Are you sure there isn't something you've left out?"

The feminine voice hesitated, then said, "You were depressed when you came on board. You said you had a premonition you would never survive the trip. And you said that after what you'd seen of the way things work out, you didn't much care. I know, because I'm a Med.El., and you talked to me about it. I was assigned to handle your group of the planet-forming crew. Don't you really remember *anything*?"

Matthews told himself that from what little he'd experienced of this only, true, original Earth race, he could see how anyone who'd spent twenty-four years in it could be a little disheartened. But why fold up and quit? Why let a race case-hardened into an academic caste-system get off that easily? A few cracks on the right joints and nerve-centers ought to loosen them up a little.

"You say I'm a Dns.El.?"

"Yes."

"How does that compare with a Med.El.?"

"Well—" she hesitated. "*Some* people say a Dns.El. makes you a professional. I . . . I don't know." Her voice brightened. "*I* don't have any prejudices myself."

Matthews made a hard effort, and ranks of abstruse formulas, and masses of specialized knowledge rose before his conscious attention, and seemed to pass in review before him. Someone, he could see, had labored hard and long to acquire all this knowledge, and what was he at the end? A mere Dns.El., not truly a professional.

Struggling to form some kind of overall mental picture, and to acquire an insight into the inner meaning of all this knowledge, Matthews made the startling discovery that no understandable unifying viewpoint was to be found. None had ever been offered. All this maze of technicalities lay on the mind like a dead weight, crammed at top speed and largely undigested. But naturally, it would have to be, if one wished to acquire his Dns.El. and start making a living sometime in the first half of his life.

Matthews threw it all out of his consciousness. He'd seen enough to know that he could familiarize himself with it rapidly when he decided to. That was all he needed to know about it now. There were other matters to be looked into.

"And I'm twenty-four, is that right?"

"Yes," said the girl, her voice tense.

Twenty-four. That gave plenty of time to get something accomplished, assuming he wasn't cut off right at the beginning. What was the tenseness in her voice for? Spurred by an instinct that seldom, if ever, failed

him, he delved earnestly into the memory that opened up to him like the pages of a book.

"You're Sylvia?" he thought.

"Yes," she said, eagerly.

"It's coming back to me. I remember that long talk we had, and the moonlight shining in the big window in the lounge."

"Oh, I'm so glad. I was afraid—Look, you *do* remember now?"

"Yes, I remember. Perhaps at first I didn't really *want* to remember."

"Amnesia is often an escape mechanism," she said knowledgeably. Matthews could see, from memory, that the girl was fairly pretty. Her figure wasn't bad either. But there was something about her habit of thought that grated on him, and he told himself, being careful not to verbalize it, that possibly he could find an ill-educated Ph.D. (advanced) a little less frozen into the rut.

"Excuse me," she added contritely. "Of course, you can't understand that. It's just the way we Med.El's talk."

"Oh, of course. What were you worried about?"

"Well, sometimes someone comes out of depth with a—Well, some of them argue and insist they're really someone else. The psychologists say it's a 'traumatic transference psychosis.' It's out of my field, and I really don't know much about it—"

And neither do they, he thought, being careful not to verbalize, but they've got a name for it, so, of course, it's all right.

". . . But the psychologists say it's a very serious condition. I was afraid when the amnesia lasted so long—But it's all right, because you remember. Of course, the trouble is, you were motivated badly."

"My motivation is all right now."

"Of course. There's often a heterochronic effect in the alleviation of motivational deterioration." She made a little sound of distress. "But of course, you can't understand." As if sensing that possibly she had trodden heavily on his sensibilities, she said hastily, "In just a little while, when you go to work on the planets, *I'll* be the one who doesn't understand. I think it's always so nice when there's an elimination, don't you? It makes so many opportunities. Here, I'll bring you out."

Matthews considered the fact that the "elimination" she was so happy about had resulted in the death of billions of his own people. But, of course, she didn't know. It was out of her province.

There was a strange sensation as the warm liquid drained away from him, and light burst on his eyelids. There was an instant when a voice seemed to say to him, "You see how they are, and the way they think. These so-called 'only true humans' in this particular space-time compartment are caught in a trap of the mind. They will finally end up in very much the state of insects, on a grand scale, if we can't break them loose somehow. You happen to be the forty-seventh instrument we've chosen to initiate the attempt. Can you at least understand the point? Will you at least *try* to do your best?"

"Don't worry," Matthews thought grimly. "You can count on me."