

Three Blind Mice

As Cameron recovered consciousness, the first thing he was aware of was pain: the sting of cuts and bruises, the searing sensation of a burn that had scorched his left forearm, a dull ache spreading from his lower back. The second datum he absorbed was that the three-man scout boat was in free fall toward the glaring surface of a planet, looming on the screen before his padded command chair.

His mind raced back over the final moments before unconsciousness. He remembered the sighting of the Yrax cruiser as it had emerged from the radar shadow of the uninhabited ice-giant planet, behind which he had stationed his tiny spy ship. The great war vessel had apparently detected the presence of the intruding Terrans at the same moment. Its instant response had been a salvo capable of blasting a battleship into its component atoms.

Which it might have done, had the target been a battleship, massive and sluggish. But even as the Yrax missiles leaped forth, Cameron had stood the tiny ship on its stern and blasted it from the line of fire at full 9-G acceleration. The scout ship had pitched and bucked in the shockwaves as massive detonations ripped the space it had occupied seconds before; but it had righted itself with a scream of overstressed gyros and streaked outward. Though its crew lay stunned by the violence of the maneuvers, its recorders whined efficiently as they abstracted precious data on Yrax firepower and cruise capability from the frantically maneuvering warship—data which had until now been an absorbing mystery to Terran Space Command.

The war—if so one-sided a conflict could be called a war—was in its third year; four Terran colonies had been attacked and wiped out to the last man. Two dozen Terran freighters had been blasted from space with no survivors. Six revenue cutters of the Terran Space Arm had been jumped and vaporized without warning. Seven mining installations had been reduced to radioactive dust. And still, absolutely nothing was known of the enemy who struck so swiftly and so ruthlessly—nothing but their name, the Yrax, gleaned from intercepted transmissions in an unknown tongue, badly garbled by star static, attenuated by the vast distances of interstellar space.

And now, Cameron realized, he and his two-man crew had encountered a Yrax warship—and were still alive to report their findings—so far.

The planet below was less than five hundred miles distant, if the mass/proximity indicator was reading accurately. The ship's velocity was over 20,000 kilometers per hour, relative, fortunately at a tangent to the planetary surface. Already the first whistlings of attenuated outer atmosphere were setting up resonant vibrations in the vessel's eternalloy hull. Cameron keyed the autopilot into action. At once the braking jets flared, filling the screens with their pale fire.

Beside him, Lucas, the engineer, leaned groggily over the auxiliary panel, his face barely visible in the dim glow of the instruments.

"Luke—you okay?" Cameron called over the sibilant shrill of the thin gases that buffeted and tore at the hurtling boat. The engineer pulled himself upright and glanced his way; his teeth showed in a brief, encouraging grin. On Cameron's right, Navigator Wybold stirred, groaned, opened his eyes, sat up.

"We're going to hit," Cameron said. "But maybe we've got enough stuff left to cushion the crunch. How're you feeling, Wy?"

"Okay—I hope," the navigator said. "How about you, Jim?"

"Still breathing," Cameron said. He studied the instrument array, forming a mental picture of the vast planet spreading below: the great ice fields, the serrated ridges of mountain ranges thrusting up like bared teeth into the dense, turbulent atmosphere. At less than one hundred miles from the surface, the broken scout boat hurtled in a long descending arc, slicing deeper into the gases of the upper stratosphere.

"We're starting to warm up," Lucas said in a clipped emotionless tone. "Hull temperature 900° and climbing fast. But so far our refrigeration gear is holding it."

"Try to put a little axial spin on us, Luke," Cameron said.

"I've only got about 25 percent control of the steering jets," Lucas said, "but I'll see what I can do."

There was a surge, as the boat responded to the spurt of energy from the small-attitude jets mounted equatorially around its hull. The panel seemed to sink away, slide sideways, rise, fall back in a nauseous gyration.

"Not so good," Lucas said. "We're spinning, but with a bad wobble. I'd better let it go at that. Another shot might put us into a full-fledged tumble."

"Luke—switch on the stern screen, will you?" Cameron ordered. The engineer fine-focused the foot-square aft viewer. Against the blackness of space, partly obscured by whipping swirls and streamers of exhaust gases, a brilliant point of light glared. Cameron saw the muscles at the corner of the engineer's square-cut jaw knot hard.

"They're following us down," he said. "Those critters don't intend to take any chances at all, do they?"

"They can't afford to—not with what we've got on our record spools," Wybold said.

"Well, maybe we'll fool them," Cameron stated flatly. "There's a lot of real estate down there to get lost in. Let's see what we can do."

Ahead, a range of knife-edged mountains towered ten miles into the eroding millrace that was the ice giant's atmosphere. Cameron jockeyed the thrust controls with a delicate touch, holding the boat prow-first in the direction of travel, using the malfunctioning steering jets to aim for the deep-cut V, like a wedge chopped by a mighty ax in the wall of jagged stone and ice. Now the peaks to left and right were above them, ripping

past, aglitter in the white glare of the distant sun. A great slope of black stone rushed toward them, directly in their path. Lucas slammed full power to the remaining starboard tubes; there was a brief flare of energy, a bone-wrenching surge—then the damaged steering engines flashed in an instant to white heat. A spray of metal vapor engulfed the boat as the automatic safety circuits blasted the explosive bolts securing them to the vessel. Light flared on the screens as the jettisoned engines detonated half a mile astern. Then a crashing, clanging impact, a long, tearing screech of tortured metal that went on and on—

And then, amazingly, silence, and the absence of all motion.

* * *

A fitful wind whined over the broken hull. Escaping air hissed thinly. Hot metal pinged! contracting. The heaters hummed, attempting to maintain a livable temperature.

Moving slowly, painfully, Cameron looked around the compartment. His couch was half-ripped from its moorings. A tangle of wiring and fluid conduits had bulged from the shattered control console. Beside him, the bulkhead was creased out of shape.

"Where are we, Wy?" he asked the navigator.

"We're down on a continental ice mass about fifty kilometers north of the estimated equator, a couple of hundred kilometers from a big sea to the north. We're about two thousand meters above nominal sea level; my range readings as we came in were kind of confused.

"We're in a high valley; peaks on all sides. Outside temperature, 210 absolute. Gravity, 1.31 standard. Air pressure, 23 psi; composition, nitrogen 85%, oxygen 10%, some water vapor. Wind velocity, 20 m.p.h. gusting to 50. It seems to be high noon; this sun radiates strongly in the upper end of the visible spectrum and in the UV, and it's pretty bright out there. It reminds me a little of Vera Cruz in that respect." He smiled briefly at the comparison of his beloved desert world with this frozen wasteland.

"I never did understand why anybody wanted to colonize that sandbox," Lucas mused, eyeing Wybold obliquely. "I suppose some people will try anything, though."

"Right—like settling down on a high-G world like Sandow, where you have to be a champion weight lifter just to walk around," Wybold replied with a ghost of a smile.

"And it looks like we'll be walking," Lucas said bluntly. "Hull broached, main power out, auxiliary power out, emergency power at 10 percent base capability. Communications out—super-E, infrawave, SWF—the works." He shook his head. "However, I got off an all-wave Mayday, before we broke through the troposphere," he added casually.

Cameron managed a grin. "I'm glad you weren't too busy adjusting the air conditioning to see to that detail."

"Hard to say what good it will do us," Lucas said. "We're a long way from the nearest Terran base." He turned to the dark cockpit display screens, flipped switches. There was no response.

"Try the DV's," Cameron suggested. Wybold fitted his face to the padded eyepiece and turned the dials which focused the direct vision scopes. He squinted into the dazzling light reflecting from the icefield—bright enough to be painful even to his insensitive vision, adapted to the blazing sunlight of his homeworld. Steep escarpments rose to either side of the long valley; against the glaring pale blue sky, a single point of brilliance winked and flickered.

"Oh-oh," he said. "They're still with us. We'll have dropped off their radar and gamma-tracer screens—but we'll show up like a bonfire on IR. If they haven't pinpointed us yet, they will any minute."

"We'll have to get out," Cameron said. "They'll blow the boat off the map. We can hole up in the rocks, maybe."

Lucas unstrapped, rose to his feet, his muscular bulk making his thick body look short in spite of his six-foot-one height. He turned to the suit locker, lifted out Cameron's suit, tossed Wybold's to him, pulled out his own.

Cameron had swiveled the DV eyepiece around, reduced the light level, and was studying the scene.

"Broken ground up ahead," he said. "Caves. That's the spot to make for."

"Sure. Better get that suit on, Jim. It's cold out there."

Cameron shook his head. "Sorry, Luke. You and Wy get moving. I'll sit tight and give them a little surprise as they close in—"

"What are you trying to do, get a medal out of this, Jim?" Lucas said. "Come on—time's a-wasting."

Cameron shook his head.

"What's this—the old captain-goes-down-with-his-ship routine?"

"My back's sprained," Cameron said. "I can't move my legs."

"Wy, let's help Jim get into his suit," Lucas said briskly.

"You're wasting time," Cameron said as the two set to work, moving clumsily in their suits, hampered by the massive tug of the big planet.

"They won't try to land that big baby," Lucas said. "She'd break up in this G-field. That means they'll have to send a shore party down in a sideboat. That will take awhile. Wy, let's unclamp my couch for a stretcher."

"That's just more extra weight," Cameron protested.

"Pile it on," Lucas said. "That's what these piano legs are for." Working swiftly, the two men freed the couch and placed the injured man in it, strapping him in securely.

Outside, Cameron looked back at the battered hull, half sunk in the frozen snow at the end of the long trough it had scored in landing.

"Take a last look," he said. "She was a good boat, but she'll never lift again—and neither will we, if we don't get out of sight in a hurry." He glanced at Lucas and saw that the big man's eyes were tight shut. Tears trickled down his cheek and froze.

"Hey, Luke—don't take it so hard," he started, only half jokingly.

"Sorry," Lucas said, opening his eyes just far enough for the navigator to see that they were enflamed and red. "I'm afraid I can't take the light. I'm snow-blind."

Wybold hesitated only for a moment. Then he stepped forward, freed a harness strap, and clipped it to a D-ring on the engineer's belt, linking them.

"Follow the leader," he said, and started up the long slope—to his desert-conditioned eyes just pleasantly illuminated—toward the jumbled rocks and the dark cave mouths a quarter of a mile away.

They had covered three quarters of the distance, when Cameron suddenly called, "Duck!"

In total silence, the Yrax gunboat rocketed into view from behind them, streaked low overhead, trailed by a deafening sonic boom that shook snow loose from the high ridges all around. In an instant, the air was filled with the rumble of sliding ice. The ground trembled underfoot, as immense glacial fragments dislodged by the sudden shock detached themselves from the slopes and started downward, driving whirling clouds of loose snow ahead.

"Run for it," Wybold shouted over the thunder, and putting his head down, he ran, with Lucas close behind.

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In a blinding fog of whirling ice crystals, the men scaled the jumble of rock, searching for a cranny big enough to conceal them. They reached the top of the first incline, found a narrow ledge leading to the left and upward between high walls—a route cut by ages of runoff water from spring thaws.

"It might be a dead end," Wybold said. "What do you think, Jim?"

"We'll try it, Wy. We don't have much choice."

Even the navigator's desert-trained vision, developed on a world where blazing sunlight and obscuring dust storms were a way of life, was of little value now. He climbed doggedly on, feeling his way up the narrow trail. There was a sharp turn, and the ravine widened into a bowl-shaped hollow—possibly an old lake basin—the walls of which were riddled with shallow, water-cut grottoes. Most of these were far too small to shelter a man, and all were choked with ice. But ahead, on the right, a single black opening showed. Wybold struggled across the drifts toward it. It was a cave, its mouth protected by a narrow passage. It seemed clear, but to

Wybold the interior was only an inky blackness.

"Luke—can you make out anything in there?"

The engineer moved up beside him, blinked his light-burned eyes, grateful for the soothing gloom.

"A small opening, but it widens out inside. Goes back a good twenty feet and turns. It'll do."

Inside, Lucas deposited Cameron's improvised cot in a sheltered spot well back from the entrance.

"All the comforts of home, gentlemen," he said.

"Better check out the back of the cave," Cameron said to Lucas. "There may be another way in."

Lucas nodded and set off, moving surely in the near-darkness.

"What do you suppose their plan of attack will be, Jim?" Wybold asked, scanning the expanse of dazzling white visible beyond the opening.

"If they're smart, they'll bring up some kind of heavy gun and blast away," Cameron replied. "But if they're smarter, they'll try to come in on foot and make sure of us."

"We'll know pretty soon," Wybold said.

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The rearmost extension of the cave, Lucas found, though it narrowed sharply, did not pinch off entirely. Concealed in deep shadow, an opening some six feet high and barely two feet in width split the rock wall. To ordinary vision, the darkness beyond would have been impenetrable; but to the Sandovian's sensitive eyes a twisting tunnel was dimly visible, leading back into the cliff. In ages past, Lucas guessed, during a warmer age in the life of the big planet, thawing ice had eroded this route down through the stone, which in turn implied an unguarded access at the far end. For a moment, he considered reporting on his finding and requesting permission to continue; then, he squeezed his powerful bulk through the narrow aperture and, ducking slightly under low clearance, prowled along the passage into the rock.

Almost at once, the way angled sharply upward, became an almost vertical shaft through tumbled rock. Climbing was difficult; the water-worn stones were smoothly rounded, hard to grip. After a dozen feet, the narrowing tunnel leveled off, became a wide, low-ceilinged shelf. Lucas was forced to lie flat and crawl, using fingers and toes.

The ceiling shelved gradually downward, closing in. When it was apparent that no more progress could be made dead ahead, he angled to the right. At once, he found himself wedged tight between floor and ceiling. With an arm-creaking effort, he pulled himself through and the passage opened out. Through a gap in the rock ahead, watery daylight leaked.

Lucas crawled forward, shielding his eyes from the light, saw a final, irregularly-walled crevice leading out to the open. He made his way along it, emerged on a windswept slope of frozen snow, bathed in the deep blue shadow of an ice peak. Here, out of the direct sunlight, he was able to see, though painfully. He made a narrow aperture between his fingers, striving to make out the details of the scene below. He was, he determined, at a point some fifty yards above and to the left of the cave mouth—a spot inaccessible to any climber from below. At his back, a vertical ice wall rose. As he was about to turn away, there was a sound from below. Motion caught his eye, below and to the left. He went flat, watched as a sticklike creature, moving quickly on four multiple-jointed legs, rounded a shoulder of ice and poised on the narrow ledge leading along the cliff face, its flexible torso curving upward in an attitude of alert listening. Four additional limbs sprang from the alien's shoulder region, the lower pair long, tipped with paired chelae, the upper pair short, flexible as a monkey's tail. The body was the color of blued steel, with a hard, polished look. Straps crisscrossed the narrow thorax, bearing badges and pouches.

For the first time, a human being was looking at a Yrax soldier.

The alien stood for a moment, the stiff, antennalike members atop its insignificant bullet-shaped head moving restlessly. Then, it darted forward. From his vantage point above, Lucas saw the narrow cleft in the ice lying directly in the Yrax's path. The Yrax, however, scanning the slopes above, failed to notice the trap. As its forelegs went over the edge, the long arms shot out, scored the ice on the far side in a vain bid for purchase. But the weight of the massive body was too great. Ice chips flew as the rear legs clawed, resisting the inexorable slide. Then the heavy torso slid down, dropped into the crevasse. For another few seconds the creature clung, while its arms raked desperately for a grip. Then, with a final screech of iron-hard claws on ice, it was gone, clattering away into the depths to lodge with a smash far below.

At the same moment, a second Yrax appeared around the abutment. It moved briskly forward, paused for a moment at the edge of the cleft, then raised its upper body and lunged across the yard-wide gap. For a moment it seemed as though it might be safe, then the forward pair of legs—which had gained a precarious purchase on the rim of ice—slipped back. As the creature clung by its forelimbs—it had secured a better grip than its predecessor—two more Yrax came into view along the path. One veered to the right, the other to the left. Neither took any apparent notice of their fellow, still clinging to his precarious hold on safety.

One of the newcomers edged to his left along the cleft to the edge of the narrow ledge it cut. It leaned out to examine the terrain below, but seemingly found nothing there to encourage it. Moving back a few feet, it sprang forward, cleared the cleft in a bound, landing with a metallic clatter, but safely, only its hind pair of legs kicking fragments of ice free from the lip of the pitfall as it pulled itself forward and disappeared from Lucas' view.

Meanwhile, the second newcomer had explored to its right, moving out of Lucas' line of sight. He heard the scrape of the horny limbs on ice, a clatter, the sounds of falling ice chunks, then a distant crashing. The creature did

not reappear.

As a fourth Yrax advanced along the ledge, the unfortunate advance guard who had been silently dangling above the abyss slipped suddenly, dropped from view. Lucas winced at the now-familiar sound of impact far below. And now more of the aliens were appearing, some scouting along the edge, some launching themselves without hesitation, some crossing the gap, others falling to unnoticed death. A few turned aside, began exploring the wall to their right. If they found a route there, Lucas realized, the rear entrance to the cave would be quickly discovered.

He eased back silently from the edge, studied the opening in the rock. It was not large, but would be obvious at even a casual glance. It would have to be camouflaged. That meant snow and ice—the only materials available.

Lucas' eyes were burning, closing in spite of his efforts to keep them open. He clambered up above the opening, then set his feet against a large block of packed snow, and pushed.

The results exceeded his expectations. The crust broke away suddenly; a slab of ice ten feet long and a yard high toppled over the edge to thud massively down before the narrow entrance—and Lucas, deprived abruptly of his grip, slid after it. He struck hard, a jagged edge of ice smashing across his ribs with stunning force. He was dimly aware of the impact of ice fragments around him, of the whirl of loose snow driven up by the displaced air, of a distant, ominous rumble.

Then something struck his head, and all thought faded into swirling darkness.

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In the cave, Wybold cocked his head, listening to the muffled rumbling that seemed to come from deep inside the mountain. A sudden gust of air puffed from the dark recesses at the rear of the deep cave, bringing with it a scattering of snow crystals. The sound died away; the fitful draft dwindled and was gone. Only a long drift of powdery snow across the floor attested to the brief flurry. Wybold turned; his eyes met Cameron's.

"Sounded like a cave-in," the injured man said.

"I'd better go have a look," the navigator said. Neither man mentioned the thought uppermost on their minds: Lucas is back there somewhere . . .

"You'll be as blind in the dark as Luke is in direct sunlight," Cameron said bluntly.

"I can feel my way. Don't forget my famous Veracruzian sense of direction." He tried to make the words sound light.

"Move me over beside the front door before you go," Cameron said.

Wybold paused. "I wasn't thinking," he said. "Of course I can't leave you here alone."

"I have my suit gun," Cameron said. "Just prop me up so I can see down

that passage."

"Wait a minute, Jim—"

"Luke might be needing help pretty badly, Wy," Cameron cut him off.
"Better hurry up."

Five minutes later, with the crippled Cameron settled in position guarding the entrance, Wybold set off along the path Lucas had followed. At first, the route was clear enough; he slipped easily through the cleft in the rock, moving forward by feeling his way with outstretched hands, sliding his feet forward to explore for unseen pitfalls. At the point where the route angled upward, he was baffled for awhile; then he found the opening leading upward and began to climb.

In the low chamber where Lucas had almost become wedged, Wybold paused for breath. In total darkness and utter stillness, he lay on his face under the shelving rock, before starting on. Directly before him, the ceiling dipped sharply. Lucas could never have negotiated that passage, the navigator felt sure. But had he gone right, or left?

Either direction seemed equally likely. Wybold chose the left. The space widened until he could rise to all fours, then to his feet, though it was still necessary to stoop. Through his open faceplate, he felt a steady flow of cold, fresh air. Feeling his way toward its source, he saw a faint glow of daylight that widened out into a steeply angled cut leading up to a strip of vivid blue sky.

It was a difficult climb up the twenty-foot slope of icy rock; but at last he reached the top and emerged on a slope of glittering snow beneath a towering crag. A ragged edge of broken snow crust ran just below his position, as from a recent snowslide. The stretch of bare rock thus exposed ended in an abrupt dropoff. Beyond and below this edge, strange figures moved.

Wybold dropped flat, watching the Yraci scouts as they scurried back and forth, exploring the extent of a great drift of broken ice blocking the ledge along which they made their separate ways. One clambered directly up the side of the heap, slipped as he neared the top, rolled helplessly back down, and disappeared over the edge. Others climbed up at other points; some succeeded in negotiating the obstruction, and hurried away along the ledge; others tumbled back to the base, back near their starting point and immediately tried again. Still others followed the one who had fallen over the side. None appeared to be aware of the efforts of his fellows. There was no particular effort to follow in the tracks of the successful climbers or to shun the routes that led to catastrophe.

For ten minutes, Wybold watched the procession. A few stragglers arrived, picked their routes, fell or passed the blockage. One last multilegged alien hurried up, skittered upslope, clattered down safely on the far side and was gone. The navigator waited another two minutes, then cautiously rose and worked his way downslope. It was an eight-foot drop to the top of the ice heap blocking the ledge. As he debated attempting the risky descent, with the idea of following the alien scouting party, he noticed a small patch of

dark blue visible through the heaped ice dust—a blue of the identical shade of a regulation Space Arm ship suit.

"Luke!" he exclaimed. In a moment Wybold had turned, lowered himself over the edge, and dropped. He struck the ice heap near its crest, caught himself as he slipped toward the adjacent chasm, and slid down beside the place where the telltale color gleamed through the drift. Quickly, he raked away the loose ice chips, lifted a larger slab aside, and exposed the engineer's left arm.

The buried man was in no immediate danger of suffocation—provided the faceplate of his suit had been closed. And the layer of fallen ice and snow did not seem to be deep enough to have done any serious damage. But Lucas lay ominously still.

Wybold cleared his arm to the shoulder, exposed his head, and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that Lucas' faceplate was closed. Five more minutes' work had cleared the unconscious man's torso. At that point, Lucas stirred. Wybold looked back down along the ledge; the route the Yraci had used was marked by their many-limbed tracks that wound back down toward the snowfield below. Ahead, the route curved out of sight. No aliens were in view, but they could return at any moment.

"Luke! Wake up," Wybold urged. "We've got to get out of sight!"

Two minutes later Lucas was on his feet, groggy from the blow a thirty-pound ice fragment had dealt him, but able to walk.

"They've gone on along the ledge, toward the cave mouth," Wybold told him. "Let's get going. Jim's holding the fort alone."

Lucas looked up at the ice-rimmed ledge above. "I'll boost you up," he said. He squatted and Wybold stepped up; after a brief scramble, he pulled himself to the top.

"Hard work in this G," Wy panted. Lying flat, he extended an arm to the engineer. Lucas found a small foothold, reached up as far as he was able. His hand was a foot short of Wybold's outstretched hand. He found a precarious handhold, pulled himself up a few inches, but slipped back.

"No go," he said. "You go on back, Wy. I'll trail our friends and keep an eye on them. Maybe I can create a diversion—"

"Uh-uh," Wybold shook his head. "I can't see my hand in front of my face in there. I almost got lost in that maze. I'd never find my way back. And as for you keeping a watch—you can't see any better out here than I can inside. We'll stick together and watch for a break." He slipped over the edge and dropped back down beside Lucas.

"All right," the engineer said. "Let's go see what they're up to."

* * *

Alone in the icy cave, settled as comfortably as his wrenched back would allow, Cameron had lain for the better part of an hour, sighting along the barrel of the weapon propped on the stone before him. The afternoon sun

glared frosty white on the patch of snow visible beyond the opening twenty feet away. Even his Earth-normal vision was beginning to suffer from the continual strain; he blinked and turned away to rest his eyes. When he looked back, an ungainly silhouette stood poised against the light.

For a long moment, neither Cameron nor the intruder moved. The Yrax seemed to be studying the dark recess, considering its next move. Suddenly it stepped forward on its four slim legs, lowering its upraised torso to duck under the entry. Cameron waited. The Yrax advanced cautiously. When it was ten feet away, it saw him. For a moment, it halted; then, it gathered its legs and crouched. Cameron took careful aim at the point of juncture of the slim neck and the horny thorax and pressed the switch of the heat gun. A brilliant point of light glinted on the alien's shiny blue-black exoderm. In the blue-white glare, smoke puffed outward from the point of contact. The creature leaped backward, its carapace raking the sides of the entry with a metallic clatter, and was gone. A rank odor of charred horn hung in the air.

Cameron uttered a harsh sigh and blinked at sweat that had trickled into his eyes. He resighted the gun and waited, looking out at stillness and silence. And, suddenly, another Yrax was framed in the entry.

This time Cameron didn't wait. The beam lanced out, seared a smoking blister on the chitinous thorax. As before, the victim recoiled, skittered from sight, apparently unharmed.

Two Yraci arrived simultaneously. One thrust ahead; the heat beam caught him, and he leaped back but collided with his fellow. For a frantic moment, the two aliens threshed, limbs entangled, while Cameron raked them indiscriminately. Then both tumbled away, darted from view.

After that, there was a lull that stretched on for half a minute, a full minute . . .

Abruptly, an alien was there, staggering under the burden of a massive shape of dull metal, which it deposited squarely in the entrance. It set swiftly to work, adjusting the apparatus, so that a series of what appeared to be ring sights were squarely aligned along the dim tunnel. At this range—the Yrax was some twenty-five feet distant—the diverging beam of the heat projector cast a disk of light that was barely visible in the glare of the sun, and seemed to discomfit the alien not at all as it busied itself at its task. Cameron shifted aim, directing his beam at the cluster of what he guessed to be the controls of the alien machine. In seconds the iodine-colored metal glowed red hot. Moments later—as the Yrax gunner squatted, multiple knees beside the armored body, to sight along the firing tube—the weapon burst with a sharp detonation that sent its operator flying in a cloud of ice chips. As the smoke of the explosion cleared, Cameron saw that the body of the device had burst, exposing coils of wiring that burned with a fierce light that suggested pure magnesium. In the next five minutes, he fired on three more Yraci who came forward as if to inspect the ruined gun. Their reactions never varied from the pattern: immediate flight.

Then a lull. Ten minutes passed. Somewhere far away Cameron heard a low rumble, as of distant cannon fire. Then nothing. Slowly, the shadows

lengthened. Cameron waited.

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From a concealed ledge a hundred yards above the cave mouth, Lucas and Wybold had watched as the aliens crawled over the tumbled moraine of rock and ice, poking into one cave mouth after another. They had seen an alien halt before the cave where they knew Cameron waited, alone and hurt, watched as the intruder started in, then tumbled out in obvious distress. They had observed as others made the attempt, ignored by their fellows, who continued to poke and probe into other dark recesses in the rock. When the weapon-bearing Yrax came up, they had tensed to jump to their feet, shout, anything to distract the gunner. But the machine had suddenly winked with blue-white light, and an instant later the sharp crack of the detonation reached their ears.

"He's holding them off," Wybold said. "But it can't go on forever."

"They don't know much about cooperation," Lucas said. "Look at that one—he's going to bring that whole ridge right down on his pals—" As he spoke, a long rim of ice which had precariously overhung the floor of the hollow broke away, came crashing down, raising the inevitable cloud of snow and ice crystals. At once, Wybold saw the opportunity. He scrambled to his feet.

"Luke—come on—while they're blinded!" He plunged forward, half slid, half fell down the slope. He came upright in a white mist as opaque as milk glass, and paused for a moment, attuning his directional sense.

"This way, Luke," he called, and plunged ahead. He dodged past the dimly-seen figure of a Yrax, groping through the murk, and skirted a mound of fallen ice; then the cave mouth opened before him. He floundered through a waist-deep drift, gained the entry.

"Jim! It's me!" he shouted. Then he was beside Cameron, who reached out to grip his hand.

"I knew you clowns had something to do with that snowstorm out there," the injured man called over the now diminishing roar. "Where's Luke?"

Wybold whirled. "He was right behind me—"

"Wait!" Cameron's voice checked him. "You can't go back out there, Wy! They'll spot you! The snow is already settling!"

"But—Luke . . ."

"Luke knows where we are," Cameron said. "He'll expect to find us here."

"I guess you're right," Wybold concurred reluctantly.

* * *

When Wybold shouted and disappeared into the obscuring whirl of snow, Lucas lowered his head against the blinding glare and charged after him. He fell almost at once, regained his feet, fell again. A massive ice block

crashed down directly in his path; he veered to the left, recoiled as the ungainly shape of a Yrax appeared before him, in distress as obvious as his own. It ignored him, blundered past, and Lucas went on, climbing the drifts, falling, picking himself up . . .

The ground was rising; Lucas paused, picturing the lay of the land as he had dimly seen it from above. There was no upward slope between his point of departure and the cave mouth. And he sensed that he had gone too far. He had covered a hundred feet at least, and the distance to the entry had been no more than seventy at most.

Vaguely now, he could see a slope of craggy ice rising above him. No more ice was falling from above. He looked back. The obscuring veil was settling. Vague shapes moved in the hollow below. In another moment he would be in plain view to the aliens. He resumed his climb, pulled himself up into a shallow gully, turned to scan the back trail. He saw the cave mouth now, half buried in snow. He had missed it by fifty feet. At least twenty Yraci prowled the ledge before it. Wybold was not in sight. That was good, Lucas told himself; he would be inside with Jim now.

And he was outside.

For half an hour, Lucas watched the apparently aimless movements of the aliens. Many of them attempted to scale the slopes that enclosed the ledge on three sides. All failed—which did not deter others from attempting the same task. Along the lower trail—the single access to the hollow, now that the upper trail was blocked—more aliens arrived, to repeat the performances of their predecessors. Then they settled down in apparent patience before the cave mouth.

"Stalemate," Lucas muttered to himself. "They can't get inside, and Jim and Wy can't get out. And if they could, the escape route's blocked. The only way out leads right into the arms of the Yraci." For another quarter of an hour he studied the scene, as the sun, obscured now behind a peak, sank swiftly lower, bringing a twilight that was soothing to the man's burning eyes.

Can't stay here, he thought. Temperature's already falling. Have to do something . . .

A trickle of snow slid down from the slope above the cave to form a low mound in the open trail. A lone Yrax, a late arrival, clambered up over it, leaving a busy trail of foot and drag marks, hurried on to join the waiting group before the cave. Bunched up as they were, they offered a perfect target for a few well-aimed rounds of artillery fire, Lucas reflected. All that was lacking was the artillery.

The engineer tensed suddenly, frowning in thought. Then he rose, moved silently along the gully until he had traversed the crest of the ridge. Below, the last gleam of dusk lit the long valley. Keeping to the high ground, Lucas set off at a brisk walk directly away from the cave.

* * *

"Getting cold out there," Wybold said. "Luke can't take a night out in the

open. Maybe I'd better go look for him."

"To you, it's been pitch dark for an hour, Wy," Cameron said. "You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Anyway, Luke will expect us to sit tight. If there's anything he can do, he'll do it."

"I feel pretty useless, just sitting here."

"I know how you feel," Cameron said. "But let's not make the mistake our pals the Yraci do."

"What do you mean?"

"They don't work together. We do. And our part of the job right now is just staying put."

"Maybe, Jim. But what if Luke can't reach the back door? What if he's waiting for us to come out that way?"

"Wy—we're both blind in a dark cave. And you aren't a Sandovian like Luke. You couldn't lug me that far on your back."

"I suppose you're right."

I hope so, Cameron thought.

* * *

The diffuse starlight lit the scene comfortably for Lucas. He made good time, coming stealthily down on the wrecked scout boat from above after a brisk twenty-minute hike. It was nearly buried in the snow that was shaken down by the sonic boom of the Yraci landing craft. There were a maze of alien footprints around it; trails led away across the snow in the direction of the cave. But no aliens were in sight.

Lucas set to work, digging the soft drifts away from the hull, at a point fifteen feet from the exposed stern. In a quarter of an hour, he had excavated a pit six feet deep and wide enough to stand in, with a minimum of elbow room. Against the curve of hull thus revealed, the rounded bulge of a steering engine housing flared. The inspection cover unsnapped easily. The engine itself was an eighteen-inch-long torpedo shape, blunt at both ends, attached to its gimbaled mountings by four heavy-duty retaining clamps. They were designed to be loosened quickly; steering engine replacement sometimes had to be made in space, under difficult conditions. In the tool locker inside the boat, there was a special wrench for the purpose; but the hatch was buried now under tons of ice. If the clamps were to be removed, it would have to be by hand.

Lucas dug away more packed snow to give his feet good purchase. He planted himself, gripped the big knurled knob in one hand, closed the other hand over it, and applied pressure. His grip slipped. He squeezed harder, threw every ounce of power in his big frame into the effort. With a sharp crack! the clamp spun free.

The second and third clamps turned more easily. The last was balky, but on the third try—an effort that made tiny bright lights whirl before Lucas'

eyes—it yielded. Carefully, he disconnected the control leads; if they were accidentally crossed, the engine would ignite at once, ejecting a 2 cm stream of superheated ions at a velocity of 2,000 feet per second—and incidentally pulverizing anyone in the vicinity. He lifted the massive engine down—its Earth-normal weight was 240 pounds—cradled it in his arms, and started back toward the cave.

* * *

The hike back was not so easy as the outward trip. For all his giant strength, Lucas was tiring. The bitter cold had taken its toll of his resources, too. Toiling up the last few hundred yards of the climb to the vantage point in the gully overlooking the cave mouth, he was forced to halt for rest at shorter and shorter intervals. He arrived at last and sank down, dumping his burden in the snow.

It had been two hours since Lucas had left the spot, but the scene below was unchanged. The score or more of Yraci still crouched waiting, outside the dark entrance to the cranny where the men had taken refuge. The darkness or the cold, it seemed, had the effect of reducing the activity of the aliens; there was no more nervous darting here and there, no fruitless exploration of routes up the slopes, no activity along the narrow trail. The besiegers seemed content to crouch motionless but for aimless waving of arms, and wait.

Wait for what? Lucas wondered. Maybe they're bringing up some big guns of their own. And if so, I'd better get moving . . .

He righted the steering engine, placed it in a convenient crevice in an exposed rock slab, and packed snow around it, taking care to lead the control cables out into the clear. He aligned it carefully, then heaped other stones over it, packing the interstices with ice. In use, the engine was endothermic, absorbing heat from its surroundings. Firing it would freeze the entire mass into a single unit.

And now he was ready. Lying flat behind the improvised heat cannon, he grasped a wire in each hand, bringing them together—

A tremendous weight struck him in the back, slamming him against the heaped stones and ice around the engine, in the same instant that, with a hard, racking bellow, the engine burst into life. Lucas, half-stunned by the impact, twisted onto his back, fighting against the grasping, threshing bulk that had hurled itself on him so unexpectedly. He had a confused glimpse of a weird, triangular head, the scarred, horny thoracic plates and multijointed arms of a giant of the Yrax species; then the alien sprang clear, rearing up to bring its anterior limbs to bear. But Lucas was not the man to wait for the attack. He threw himself at the ungainly, ten-foot creature, knocked its rodlike legs from under it, grappled it around the body. Its limbs flashed as it struck vainly at him, but he rose to his knees, and using the full power of his giant torso and shoulders, hurled the alien from him. It raked at the ice, sending up a shower of chips; then it was gone, to slam down the steep slope with a crash like a ground car striking an abutment.

The roar of the steering engine had continued without pause. As Lucas clawed his way back to it, he saw at once that the impact of his body under the Yrax's attack had knocked it out of its careful alignment. The jet stream—a blue-white bar of ravaging energy that lit the scene like a flare—instead of raking the besieging aliens, was searing the naked ice slope above the cave, sending a vast cloud of exploding steam boiling up against the sky. Vainly, the engineer threw his weight against the emplacement; but the engine was locked in a solid frozen matrix as impervious as granite.

As Lucas stared in bitter dismay at the target point across the gorge, the entire slope seemed to stir at once. With infinite leisure, cracks opened all across the great sheet of ice. Slabs the size of skating rinks came sliding down to spill over the edge and slam down on the ledge below. In moments, the hollow was a churning cauldron of whirling snow, driven up by the stream of snow, ice, and rock arriving in an ever-increasing volume from above. Here and there, around the periphery of the bowl-shaped space, a Yrax was visible, frantically attempting to climb the encircling wall, only to fall back and disappear in the blinding flurry.

Lucas found a loose fragment of stone, pounded at the ice encasing the bellowing engine, exposed the control wires. He ripped them apart and instantly the booming echoes crashed and died. The rumble and thud of falling ice dwindled, faded out. The blizzard driven up by the avalanche settled, revealing heaped banks from which here and there struggling alien limbs projected. But where the mouth of the cave had been, great drifts of broken ice rose up, burying it at least ten feet deep.

A lone Yrax freed itself from the snow, hurried to the point at which the trail had led from the hollow. But now a wall of snow barred egress. The alien scouted back and forth, tried to find a foothold, fell back, tried again, but fell back again. Others of the buried creatures were struggling clear of their icy entombment, and each tried and failed to find a route out of the hollow.

They're trapped, Lucas thought numbly. But so are Jim and Wy. I could lead them out the back way—if I could reach it. They can't do it alone in the dark, even if Wy could carry Jim.

And even if they got clear—what then? We can't live long in this ice hell . .

.

There was a sound from below and behind Lucas. He crawled to the spot where he had thrust the giant alien over the edge. Twelve feet below, the alien crouched, its oddly featureless face turned up toward him. One of its legs was broken in two places.

"You're in a bad spot too, aren't you, fellow?" Lucas said aloud. "It looks like nobody wins and everybody loses."

A ratchety sound came from the creature below. Then a rasping voice which seemed to emanate from a point on the alien's back said clearly:

"Human, I underestimated you. It was a grave fault, and for that fault I die."

* * *

For a moment, Lucas was stunned into paralysis by the astonishing speech. But only for a moment.

"Where did you learn to speak Terran?" he said.

"For nine hundred ship periods I have monitored your transmissions of pictures and voices," the alien said in its flat, unaccented tone. "It was a strange phenomenon, worth investigation though passing understanding."

"Why haven't you communicated with us before?"

"For what purpose?"

"To end this tomfool war!" Lucas burst out. "What do you want from us? Why do you raid our colonies and attack our ships?"

The creature was silent for a long moment.

"It is the way of life," it said. "Could it be otherwise?"

"We could cooperate," Lucas said. "The galaxy is big enough for everybody."

"Cooperate? I know the word. It is a concept I have been unable to analyze."

"To work together. You help us, and we help you."

"But—how can this paradox be? Your survival and mine are mutually exclusive destiny-patterns. It is the nature of life for each being to strive to destroy all competitors."

"Is that why you've been killing men wherever you found them?"

"I have not tried to kill you," the Yrax stated. "Only your . . ." It used an incomprehensible word. Lucas asked for a translation.

"Your . . . cell bodies. Minions. Worker units. Curious—I cannot find the word in your tongue."

"You're not making sense. You were trying hard to kill us when you shot our boat down!"

"You speak as though . . . there were other men in association with you." The alien seemed deeply puzzled about something.

"It takes more than one man to operate even a scout boat. Anyway, a man would go crazy in space alone."

"You are saying that you shared your ship with other men?"

"Naturally."

"But—what kept you from tearing each other to pieces, as is the law of life?"

"If that's a law, it's time it was repealed," Lucas said. "Listen, Yrax—you're

not making any sense. You had a crew of over twenty Yraci on your own ship—"

"Never! There was only I."

"You're talking nonsense, Yrax. A couple of dozen of them are digging themselves out of the ice not fifty yards from here!"

"Those! But they are only my cell bodies, not Yraci!"

"They look exactly like you—"

"To alien sensors, perhaps—but they are no more than extensions of myself, spored off by me as needed, mindless creatures of my will. Surely, it is the same with you? I sensed, through their preceptors, that you, as I, are larger than your workers. Surely, the two units trapped in the cave are creatures of your mind and body, responsive to your thoughts, having no volition of their own? Can it be otherwise, in all sanity?"

"It is otherwise," Lucas said. "So you never heard of cooperation, eh? Well, you claim to have all the brains in your party. I have a proposition for you . . ."

* * *

"I had to give him credit for seeing logic when it was pointed out to him," Lucas said forty-one hours later, seated before the alien control panel of the launch provided by the Yrax. "Without his crew men—or cell bodies, as he calls them—and I suppose he has a right to, his biology isn't much like ours—Without them, he was dead. When I told him I knew an escape route from the trap—and that I'd show it to him, if he'd lend us transport home—he agreed in a hurry."

"You took a chance, trusting him," Cameron said. "After you hauled him out and splinted his leg, he could have nipped you in two with those arms of his."

"He'd still have been stuck. He needed me to guide his boys out. Once he got the idea through his head that we could actually work together instead of automatically killing each other, things worked fine. It took us a few hours to melt a route to the top, and clear the cave mouth, and he did his share like a trooper."

"It's strange to think of a race of intelligent beings who never see each other, never have any contact, still developing a technology."

"With mutual telepathy, what any one of them learned, they all know. And they can create as many cell bodies as they need to do whatever they want done. I don't suppose there are more than a few hundred of the 'brain' Yraci on their planet—but there are millions of their workers."

"Not what you'd call a democracy," Wybald said.

"Their 'workers' are like our arms and legs," Lucas said. "Parts of their bodies. You couldn't very well give your fingers and toes an equal vote."

"Right now my stomach is giving the orders," Cameron said. "It says it's time to eat."

"Have a nutrient bar—courtesy of our Yrax friend," Lucas said. "They're not bad. Taste a little like stuffed dates. You know, there might be a market for them at home."

"The Yrax was pretty impressed by the energy-cell principle of the steering engine we gave him," Wybold said. "I foresee a brisk commerce between Terra and Yrax."

"It's a tragedy that there had to be all that destruction, ships blasted, lives lost—just because it never occurred to the Yraci to sit down and talk things over."

"It's not an easy lesson," Lucas said. "We humans had a little trouble learning it, if you remember your history." He grinned at Cameron, and the captain's black face grinned back at him.