

A ROUTINE FLIGHT UNTIL—

K-262 to Eppan.

At first a mere checkup job, to determine if the Robot Regent of Arkon has planted agents there.

But when the telepath boards the spaceship, he is gripped by a nameless terror.

With all life in the Milky Way threatened by the Druuf Danger, the expedition to Eppan ordered by Perry Rhodan is but one of many probes... but it differs from all the rest when the men of the K-262 realize anew in frightening fashion a law of the conquest of space: the universe will confront inquisitive man time and again with mysteries and dangers. One of the greatest examples of this is the sheer terror of—

THE HORROR

1/ HALF MOON IN THE ARENA

The great arena at Rapmaag was an unfine madness. Here was the stench of sweat, blood and animals intermingled with the damp smell of the battle-torn earth... the fanatic shouts of the jumbled masses of spectators consisting of peasants, officials, dignitaries, merchants, smugglers, labourers, soldiers and noblemen... the clamour of fighting, the creak of leather, the clatter of weapons and the bellowing of wounded animals...

In the midst of the spectator throng, Walt Scoobey gave the odd impression of being an overgrown elf or hobgoblin in his Eppanian disguise. He nudged his companion, Marcus Everson. "Sir, how will we find our contact man in this place?" he asked. He swept a meaningful glance across the vast circle of the arena where the surging mass of people presented a colourful panorama. There were very few seats left in the crowd.

Standing 6'2" in his own disguise, Col. Marcus Everson was not any less grotesque than Scoobey. He searched the throng cautiously. "He'll get in touch with us," he answered. "It's advisable for us to keep our voices down. We can't take a chance of becoming conspicuous. I just hope that Goldstein thought of that."

A fanfare of trumpets interrupted further explanations. The main war games were beginning. Six powerful draft animals dragged a cage into the central area of the arena. Imprisoned within the cage was a saurian type of beast.

"Don't tell me there's anybody foolish enough to fight that monster!" said Scoobey incredulously.

His voice was drowned by the enthusiastic howling and shouting of the crowd. Several assistants appeared in the arena, unhitched the work animals from the cage and led them out. They had no sooner been brought to safety than the gate of the cage was swung open by means of a long rope, which was cautiously manipulated from the edge of the fighting area. The monstrous creature hesitantly stretched out its serpent-like neck but the thrill-thirsty crowd's roaring appeared to confuse the beast.

The attendants came back like so many picadores and prodded the monster with long, sharp poles. They achieved their objective because suddenly the monstrosity went into a blind rage and charged out of the cage in a cloud of red dust. As it came too close to the circular balustrade, the terrified spectators in the front rows fled upward to safety.

Directly beneath the royal loge section a door opened at ground level. In a storm of welcoming applause, a tall Eppanian stepped into the arena. By Eppanian standards he was a big man, almost as tall as Everson. The narrow slits of his eyes were almost closed because of the roiling clouds of dust. His large protruding ears were covered with wavy hair. The warrior wore a light cuirass of leather for protection. In his right hand he held a heavy-bladed sword.

"Do you mean to tell me he's going up against the beast with that toothpick?" Scoobey cried out in bewilderment. "That's just plain suicide!"

Everson answered unperturbed: "I hope not, Walt—it would be a shame. That madman down there happens to be our contact man, who is supposed to lead us to Goldstein."

Scoobey became nervous. His hand groped in voluntarily beneath the wide, colourful cloak that he wore in place of his Solar Empire space uniform.

Everson quickly grasped his arm. "No weapons!" he ordered. "Do you want to give us away with a raygun shot?"

Scoobey collected himself with an effort. "Are you sure that fellow down there risking his life is the man we want?"

Everson nodded decisively. "Do you see the belt he's wearing? It's decorated with half-moon symbols. Our recognition signal happens to be: 'half moon in the arena'."

Meanwhile the Eppanian gladiator had greeted the king and moved into the centre of the arena, where he waited for his giant opponent to become aware of him. The visible portions of his body were marked by the scars of past encounters.

A long drawn-out cry of challenge emerged from the throat of the warrior. The small, stupid eyes of the beast peered at him across the battlefield. With its head thrust forward on its serpentine neck, the monster made a scurrying charge toward the lonely, waiting figure, shaking the ground with its tons of muscle and flesh. A resounding cry of horror went up from the spectators when the titanic creature reached the Eppanian and threatened to hurl him to the ground. But just in time the man darted out of the

path of destruction with a fantastic lateral broadjump. The beast hurtled past him, unable to control its massive momentum so quickly. The Eppanian straightened up swiftly to face his antagonist, who came to a halt at the barrier wall and then gathered itself for a new attack.

Everson heard Scoobey attempting to stifle a groan of despair. The First Officer was leaning forward on the bench with his head supported in his hands. The Eppanian down below, fighting for his life, also ran to the barrier wall.

"Isn't this inhuman?" muttered Scoobey.

"It's all on a voluntary basis," Everson reminded him. "Nobody is forced to fight against his will. Gladiators are paid more than even the ministers of state—and they're probably more popular. That's why they play their highest stake, which is their life!"

"Goldstein should have gotten in touch with us right away," complained Scoobey impatiently. "He's wearing the same disguise as we are. Sometimes I can't figure these mutants."

Everson smiled, being familiar with Scoobey's mind and character. Without benefit of a calming influence, the officer was like a stick of dynamite with a short fuse. "Goldstein is still a youngster and this is his first assignment. Besides, these telepaths are very sensitive and cautious. Hey—look at that!"

Everson's exclamation was related to events transpiring in the arena. Braced in a slightly crouched position with his back to the wall, their contact man held his sword at a low angle and calmly observed the onrushing charge of the great beast. In a blind transport of rage the great brute threw itself upon the frail man-thing who dared stand up against it. The Eppanian ducked behind the protection of a blind wall that the enclosure provided and from that vantage point he struck the first blow. Thrusting directly upwards he pierced the long neck of the towering animal. Berserk with pain and surprise, the monster crashed and flailed mightily against the rough clay-brick wall beneath the balustrades. Once more there was a shrill outcry from the fleeing spectators and Everson silently asked himself why those lower and more dangerous seats cost so much.

Demonstrating a combination of cold-blooded calm and rash courage, the Eppanian manoeuvred around his massive and overwhelming adversary, at the same time deftly evading the whipping tail. The beast had temporarily lost sight of him in the red clouds of dust it had stirred up. The brilliant yellow of the royal box was dulled by the choking haze but the cry of the multitudes came crashing back like a tidal wave. In spite of the primitive instincts which were appealed to by the battle, Everson had to grudgingly concede that the situation was undeniably exciting.

The gladiator fought with prudence and decision, shrewdly turning the slowness and superior weight of the animal to his advantage. His real weapons were intelligence and nerves of steel, whereas the sword was only their implementation.

"He's making it!" shouted Scoobey excitedly. "By all the planets! Nobody will ever believe this story. They'll call me a liar." He looked ruefully at Everson.

It was with some effort that the colonel suppressed the well-deserved observation that Scoobey had circulated many a dubious tale among the cadets of the Space Academy which were far more incredible than this one—and with equally serious mien. Yes, when all was said and done, Scoobey would no doubt embellish this fabulous fight and also reserve in its telling a supporting role for himself.

The 'duel' below was nearing its end. The monster's movements were becoming slower. On the other

hand, the Eppanian continued to move about with the precision of an untiring machine. The final part of the contest was somehow depressing and Everson had a sense of revulsion when the mighty beast sank into the dust and darkened the ground with its blood. The beaming victor strode to the front of the royal loge and raised his arm in greeting. The king stood up—a small, pudgy figure with short arms and abrupt movements. A frenetic applause overwhelmed the conqueror.

There was a flat taste in Everson's mouth. Hundreds of Eppanians stormed down into the arena and the gladiator was carried out on the shoulders of a spirited throng.

"It's over with," said Scoobey. "So what now?"

"It'll definitely be a tough job to get to him now," admitted Everson. "His fans will be surrounding him for awhile yet. I guess he was the main attraction today. Maybe in the meantime we could take a look around near the king."

"What for?" asked Scoobey, frowning in his impatience. "Do you have a yen to hail His Chubbiness or something?"

Everson indicated the loge section. The entire group of notables had risen to its feet, most of them towering over the king by at least a head in height. Everson wondered what this most powerful man on Eppan might have to say if he were aware of the presence of 3 men here who had come from a planet more than 10,000 light-years distant. What would the ruler have thought if he had seen the guppy which they had landed in a desolate region not far from the city?

But Everson took up the question posed by his companion. "Put yourself in the place of the agents of an alien power," he said. "Where would you be most likely to stay? Where would you keep yourself?"

"Of course you're right, sir," agreed Scoobey. "If anybody is going to get a firm footing on this planet—or if anybody already has—he won't likely pose as a simple man in the street. Well, Goldstein has had enough time by now to find out if any operatives from a space-travelling alien race have shown up here already. If they have, we can only hope that he's been careful."

Everson got up slowly. Even beneath the Eppanian disguise his imposing figure was impressive. The superior talents of the Arkonides in the biological sciences plus their extraordinary medicines and serums had enabled this 85-year-old man to appear like a hale and hearty person in his early 50s. The colonel would be able to live for 140 years.

"Alright," he decided, "let's try our luck."

They pushed their way from their seat section toward the exit. A small, wizened-looking Eppanian blocked their way. "You are probably leaving now because Mataal has finished fighting?" he asked. His voice sounded squeaky and shrill, with an ominous undertone.

Along with Goldstein and Scoobey, Everson had come through a course of hypno-training in the Eppanian language and dialects. He answered in a friendly manner. "Mataal's courage and spirit were very inspiring. Our homeland lies far to the North, near Aplaag. Our own arena has nothing comparable to offer. This fellow Mataal is in a class by himself."

A smile touched the withered face of the Eppanian. His eyes beamed with pride.

Everson bent down toward the man in a confidential manner, at the same time dropping a number of

coins into his pocket. "My friend, we have to return soon to Aplaag but before we do we'd like to see Mataal and get to talk to him. I'm sure you can help us."

The man looked at him shrewdly and shook his head. "I can't get away from here just now," he said in a tone of regret. "I have to watch the entrance gate so that nobody comes in without a ticket. If I leave this place I'll lose my job."

The man's smallness of character matched his diminutive stature. His petty domain of influence made him proud and important. He patted his pocket meaningfully where Everson's coins had disappeared. The colonel slipped him a few more coins.

"I have an idea," said the dried-up little gnome promptly. "Go back into the arena. Right near the stairs leading to the spectator sections you'll find the gates leading into the fighters' quarters. They are guarded by Orgabaas, who is a friend of my wife."

Scoobey grinned and nudged Everson with his elbow.

"Cut that out!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Orgabaas will be able to give you further assistance," promised the Eppanian. "But of course, that depends—" He again tapped his pocket but was referring to his friend.

Everson thanked him and pulled Scoobey away. They retraced their steps and soon found the entrances indicated. An old crotchety Eppanian with a startlingly yellow complexion barred their way. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked them gruffly.

Without a word, Everson slipped a few coins into the man's hand, causing the other's unfriendly expression to vanish magically.

Scoobey mentally remarked, with some bitterness, that half the galaxy appeared to be on the take—always a hand behind the back.

Once again Everson became the spokesman. "We want to get to Mataal. We're from Aplaag and we'd like to see this great fighter before we return home."

Orgabaas nodded silently toward one of the entrances. Everson signalled his first officer to wait there and he entered by himself. A biting odour of poorly dried dye or paint smote his nostrils. The room was overcrowded with Eppanians. Somewhere in this jam of bodies was Mataal. Everybody seemed to be talking at once in great confusion and it didn't seem to matter whether or not anybody was listening. Everson shoved through a group of young Eppanians in order to get deeper into the room.

Then he saw Mataal. The gladiator had removed his leather harness and now lay upon a bluish mat. His eyes were closed. Around him the fanatics were standing, crouching, kneeling or even lying down, all of them gesticulating wildly. Without compunction, Everson used his powerful arms to push through them to the mat.

Wearing a congenial grin, he bent down close to Mataal, managing to whisper in his ear: "Half moon in the arena."

Mataal opened the slits of his eyes. They were black and fathomless. Everson had the feeling he could have seen his reflection in them if he moved closer to them. He firmly met their searching gaze. The

clamour of voices became louder now as everybody assumed this was the moment when they could deluge the famous warrior with their questions and requests for special favours.

"My friends..." Mataal's gentle voice reached to the farthest corner of the room. "Please go!"

Everson was amazed to see that the room was vacated at once.

When all of his followers had disappeared, Mataal spoke again. "They are like children, wouldn't you say?" His voice was pleasing and cultured in its tones. Certainly this man must have other means of livelihood without any need for gambling his life. However, Everson was in no mood to get involved in a discussion of Mataal's admirers. "Where is Goldstein?" he asked curtly.

Mataal rose lithely to his feet and placed both hands on the colonel's shoulders but even in that gesture Everson felt the matchless strength in the other's arms. "I'll lead you to him," he said willingly. "However, the young fellow's condition is different than you might imagine."

The hidden meaning behind these words startled Everson. "Is he sick?" he asked, somewhat hoarsely.

"I must confess that I don't know," replied Mataal. "I find him to be changed somehow but he doesn't speak of it. After his arrival he often disappeared for days at a time. I don't know what assignment you have given him but when he returned to me several days ago he appeared to be troubled. He became silent... withdrawn... indifferent. Since then he has not left my house." Everson's mind raced feverishly in reaction to this.

What could have happened to the young mutant? Or did it have something to do with Mataal himself, who seemed to be extraordinarily intelligent for an Eppanian.

"Did Goldstein say anything at all that might indicate his unusual actions are connected with a third party?"

"He doesn't talk about it," Mataal reiterated. "You may judge for yourself. You may rest assured that your friend lacks nothing and is enjoying all the privileges of a guest." After a short pause he added: "If you wish, we can go now."

Everson nodded his agreement and Mataal led the way to the exit. As he opened the door, Walt Scoobey stuck in his red-coloured head. "Hello, sir!" he said, casting a sidelong glance at Mataal. "A few moments ago a whole army of people marched out of here. Do you mean to say they were all inside there?"

"Walt..." Everson spoke tensely, momentarily dropping the Eppanian language. "This man has just told me that something's wrong with Goldstein. He says he's changed."

Scoobey scratched his artificially enlarged ears. Spectators were coming from all directions to express their admiration of Mataal. With Orgabaas' help, the fighter managed to get clear of them. The three of them left the arena and Mataal led them into the city.

The individual edifices they passed were more or less sumptuously constructed out of clay bricks, wood and rough-hewn stone, according to the wealth and means of each owner. Horse-like animals and the oval-shaped carts they drew behind them over the uneven streets served as the means of transportation. Mataal was again met with many deferential greetings. The three of them walked along together without exchanging a word.

Mataal stopped in front of a building that was distinguished from the others by its conspicuous size. "This is my house," he said proudly and he led the way. Several servants in colourful dress opened the doors before them. Mataal smiled. "The visible success of a fighter," he said, "or his facade, if you will."

After passing through an inner court they entered a tastefully furnished room. Mataal looked from Everson to Scoobey.

"Would you care for a refreshment?"

"Just take us to Goldstein," demanded Everson impatiently.

Mataal smiled with forbearance and led them into a small immaculate room in which there was a low wooden bed. A young man lay there with his eyes wide open. He did not move when they entered. He did absolutely nothing.

It was Goldstein.

From the doorway, Mataal said softly: "Of course he is not an Eppanian, no more than you two are Eppanians!"

2/ THE MUTANT & THE GLADIATOR

Like a clown from a country circus, the young mutant lay on the bed in front of Everson. His synthetically elongated ears protruded at an extreme angle from his head. His yellow skin was pale. Apparently Goldstein hadn't taken any trouble to keep his natural skin tone from showing through. His wig was now only a wrinkled bale of hair strands.

These impressions shocked Everson so much that Mataal's remark only registered with him when Scoobey glanced at Goldstein and uttered a half-stifled curse. Everson felt his stomach muscles tighten. Who was this Mataal who was able to solve every problem and see through everything with such apparent ease? Could he himself be a telepath? Did he possess other paranormal powers—which could perhaps explain his incredible triumphs in the arena?

"Who else knows it?" he asked grimly.

Mataal made a gesture of rejection with his hands. "I am no gossip or babbler of tales. Only I know it."

Everson realized that there was only one remaining alternative. Since Mataal knew their identity, in order to keep him from spreading it around they would have to take him to the guppy. Not only that—Mataal would have to accompany them back to the Earth. With his knowledge he represented an incalculable danger. If he should fall into the hands of enemy agents he'd be forced to babble out everything he knew in a matter of seconds. But Perry Rhodan placed a top priority on keeping the Solar Empire's agent assignments a secret.

"Mataal," began Everson after collecting himself, "there is much that I would have to explain to you. You

wouldn't understand it. Relatively speaking, your horizon is too limited to be able to absorb it all. We come from another solar system at the edge of the galaxy. I can only assure you that we are here for a good purpose."

"I know Goldstein," said Mataal. "Now I know you. That's enough. I trust you."

Everson turned to the mutant again.

"He's like a dead man," observed Scoobey grimly.

The colonel felt a surge of sympathy for the young agent. He admired this breed of men who maintained their lonely vigils light-years from their home planet and pursued their missions for the sake of the survival and further development of their species.

He went to the head of the bed where the youngster would have to see him. Goldstein's eyes seemed to be focussed into a far distance where they saw imaginary things which were apparently beyond his understanding.

"Goldstein," Everson called to him. "This is Marcus Everson. Beside me is Walt Scoobey. Do you recognize us?"

"Yes." The telepath responded in a broken voice and for a moment his eyes came back to the reality of the room. He was like a stringless puppet that one had to lift up in order to reanimate. There was something about him that convinced Everson the man was not too happy about their being here. There was a silent sort of protest in his manner—an unexpressed but detectable rejection. It was a changed and alien Goldstein who lay there.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" Everson asked.

"It's nothing," said the mutant softly. "It's really nothing."

Everson looked quickly at Mataal. The Eppanian stood nearby looking at Goldstein almost apathetically. His dark eyes were half closed. It was so still in the room that Everson could hear the breathing of the others. Perhaps Goldstein was afraid and did not wish to speak while Mataal was in the room.

"Would you leave us alone for a moment?" he asked. Silently the gladiator left the room. Everson heard him call one of the servants to him, once he was outside. But he could not yet figure what the Eppanian's intentions might be.

"Well?" he asked, turning back to Goldstein. "Do you want to talk now?"

"Everything is in order here," Goldstein suddenly assured him. He seemed to make a strenuous effort to put strength into his voice. "There is not the slightest indication anywhere that this planet is being visited by another race capable of interstellar space travel. There are no alien agents on Eppan. With few exceptions the natives here are harmless to the point of decadence. I'd never believe they were capable of developing a technical civilization. In all confidence I'm sure we can return to Earth."

"Did you tell Mataal that we are not Eppanians?" interjected Scoobey.

"He's very sharp. Besides, I think he smells a piece of business."

Everson decided that this was not a precise answer to a direct question. Aloud, he asked, "what makes you so psyched out? Are you sick or something? Is this some sort of local phenomenon that's common to the natives?"

"No," replied Goldstein bluntly. "I'm not sick. What makes you think so?"

Lying there thin and pale, he looked and sounded like a person debilitated by a long illness. It was only with an apparent effort that he kept his words coherent. "I don't know what it is. Most likely something to do with the climate."

Everson was familiar with the short succession of summer and winter on Eppan but could that be the reason for Goldstein's metamorphosis? Scoobey's perplexed expression confirmed that his first officer was as much at sea as he was. Whatever had happened to this youngster on Eppan, he had to be brought back to Earth as quickly as possible. In Terrania the specialists would quickly determine what was the matter with Goldstein.

During his long years of service, Everson had acquired a sure instinct for impending catastrophe and that instinct was ringing alarm bells now. He had to get the mutant out of these surroundings. "Mataal!" he called sharply.

The Eppanian's complete composure when he returned made an impression on Everson. He regretted that he was not equipped with telepathic faculties which would give him an insight into this man's thoughts.

"We're going to bring Goldstein to our spaceship," he announced. "We're going home."

The slitted eyes glittered coldly. Everson felt like a dumbly blinking animal in the arena who had been delivered up to the murderous swordblade of this cold-blooded mystery of a man.

"I'll escort you out of the city," offered the Eppanian courteously.

Everson pulled himself together. He answered coldly: "Just one step farther than that, sonny. You will come with us to our planet."

Mataal laughed indifferently but spoke only one word: "No!"

"Turn around!" ordered Everson.

Mataal saw Scoobey standing behind him. The first officer had his paralysis gun trained on him.

"We have two alternatives," explained Everson. "We can paralyse you with this weapon—or kill you. Don't forget that we're ready for anything right now. Our people are involved in a cosmic gamble in which the slightest mistake can mean our destruction. Our mission is far too important for us to consider individuals when it comes to a showdown. You'd better understand that—and quickly."

In the ensuing silence, Everson marvelled at the alien. He had received these words with the same unshakable calmness that he had demonstrated in the arena.

"You have played your hand," said Mataal, indicating Scoobey. "Now it's *my* turn. Of course you can kill me but in that case you would not be able to leave this house alive. When you sent me outside so that you could talk privately to Goldstein I informed my servant staff that my guests would leave the house

only under my escort. Do you understand? If you cripple me with that weapon you'll have another problem on your hands. If you'll pardon a small egotism, how could you hope to reach your spaceship with the inert body of the most popular man in town? And if you neither kill me nor paralyse me, then you'll have to consider that I'll declare to the first passerby that I'm going with you under compulsion."

He smiled. His self-assuredness was disconcerting. When he continued, his voice took on a mocking undertone. "Anyway, it's better for you if you remain anonymous. If you use this weapon, there's no way to keep people from becoming suspicious of you. Our most modern weapon here is a crossbow."

The man's marked intelligence, his confident perspective of the situation and his logical handling of it could wreck their entire mission. A primitive barbarian—by Earthly standards—had demonstrated his ability to oppose them.

"OK!" interjected Scoobey. "We'll take our chances." He pressed the barrel of his weapon into Mataal's back. "You will lead the way. We'll give you directions. If you let even a peep out of you I'll use this on you. We'll explain to the people in the streets that we are your friends and that the fight in the arena has so exhausted you that you've had a breakdown. We, your friends, are taking you to a famous physician who is with us here in the city. Alright, Mataal, let's go!"

Unresistingly the Eppanian strode to the door. Scoobey followed him with a determined expression on his face.

Everson looked back at Goldstein, who still remained lying motionlessly on the bed. "Come on, man!" he urged him. "Get a move on!"

Listlessly, Goldstein groped his way out of the primitive bed. He looked awful. His eyes were in deep hollows and he wasn't able to straighten himself up.

"Pull yourself together," Everson snapped at him. But immediately he regretted his words. He was convinced that Goldstein was doing the best he could.

As they exited the room they noticed one of the servants standing near the door. From the man's expression they could assume they were not being threatened by him. Nevertheless, Everson breathed a sigh of relief once he had left the house.

* * * *

It happened just before they reached the edge of town. Mataal was several steps in front of Goldstein and Scoobey while Everson walked somewhat apart from them and to the side. Suddenly a carriage-like vehicle came toward them. The Eppanian who crouched within the oval cart sought to drive his unkempt animal to a faster pace, with a clucking of his tongue and the tip of his whip. When the contraption reached Mataal he gave a hoarse shout and made a desperate jump behind the wheels.

Everson heard Scoobey's wild curse. He ran around the cart in order to shove Mataal into his companion's field of fire but the driver raised up and swung his whip at Everson, catching him directly across his back. The colonel recoiled under the fury of the lash.

Meanwhile, Mataal had succeeded in jumping inside the cart. Scoobey, who could not shoot for fear of hitting Everson, jumped in behind him. Again the driver brought his whip into play. He was a stocky, broad-shouldered man who fought in silent stubbornness. With each blow he wielded his lips parted, showing the brown stumps of his teeth.

Scoobey ducked under a haymaker from Mataal and got his arms around the arena champion's legs. Everson got up again, breathing hard. A rod of fire seemed to be lying across his back, burning its way deeply into his flesh. He grabbed the driver's raised arm and pushed it back. The man lost his balance and fell with Everson to the ground, raising a swirl of dust that came biting into Everson's eyes. He prayed fervently that no other Eppanians would appear at this moment. His antagonist was comparatively small and not too much of a challenge.

"Hurry, sir!" he heard Scoobey panting. "This one's getting away!"

Mataal pressed the smaller officer back over the wagon rail and threw him out. Everson knocked his opponent away with a heavy blow and threw himself onto Mataal, who was preparing to climb into the driver's seat so as to get the draft animal in motion. He charged the Eppanian wildly and knocked him back, causing the other to strike his head hard against the wooden backboard. He saw Scoobey kneeling in the dust with the paralysis gun in his hand. Red circles danced in front of his eyes. His body was flooded with pain. "Walt—the animal!" he yelled with an effort. "Aim at the animal!"

The already-moving vehicle slowed its pace as Scoobey aimed and fired. The effect of the shot stunned the animal and Mataal as well and both sank down unconscious. Another shot put the driver out of the action also.

"We'll have to carry Mataal," said Everson, rubbing his injured head. "The driver can stay where he is. It'll be some time till he comes to. He won't be able to tell much."

Scoobey nodded but he frowned. "The kid!" he exclaimed.

Everson looked back. Goldstein stood in the same spot as before. He had not taken the least part in the battle.

3/ "DEATH IS ON BOARD!"

The whispering of the electronic equipment grew to a distinct roar. Everson opened his eyes and attempted to penetrate the semidarkness.

He was aware of having been disturbed in his sleep by an indefinable sound. It was a noise out of harmony with the usually monotonous humming and clicking of the machinery on board a guppy. He was amazed to note that his heart was pounding practically in his throat. He shook his head as though to clear it of this indefinable agitation and he switched on the lights.

The small room was furnished in functional simplicity. Everson had expected that the illumination would help to dispel his feeling of uneasiness but in this he was deceived. He dressed himself and left the cabin. Guppy No. K-262 had been fondly dubbed *Fauna* by its crew members. It was now in free fall.

His hands slid effortlessly along the companionway railings that led up to the control room as he felt his nervousness beginning to subside. Most of the 15-crew were off duty in their cabins just now but before the next transition all that would quickly change because then all hands would be required at their posts.

Scoobey, a communications man, and Cadet Ramirez were on the command bridge of the control central when he came in.

"Hello, sir!" Scoobey greeted him. "How come you didn't finish your sack time?"

It was a legitimate question because the first officer was able to handle the present routine tasks without any help.

"I want to talk to Matal and Goldstein," replied Everson, more or less inventing an answer. "Maybe the kid is better now."

Scoobey grinned and was about to make a reply when suddenly one of the cabin doors banged open in the passageway below them. A lean, dark-haired technician named Gerald Finney looked up at them with a troubled expression.

Everson leaned over the bridge railing. "What's the matter with you, Finney?"

On Finney's forehead was a small, well-healed scar that appeared to gleam up at Everson in the shape of a triangle. "I don't know," the spaceman stuttered. It was obvious that he was trying to cover up something.

"What are you doing running around during your rest period?" asked Everson harshly.

"I—I was thirsty," answered the technician hastily and he swallowed hard as though to back up his story.

"Come up here!" ordered the colonel.

Finney hastened to comply. When he reached the bridge, Everson looked at him sharply. And then he saw it—Finney was afraid!

"Alright, now what really happened?"

Finney's eyes focussed on a spot in space at which he might stare without arousing suspicion. Everson noticed that his lips trembled when he spoke.

"I had a bad dream," Finney blurted out. "Don't think it's the space squeebees or something, sir. You know I've got plenty of flight time in the Big Vac—I mean, my IVO's sir." He was referring to his rating credits for Interstellar Void Orientation. "It was just a lousy nightmare."

"What did you dream?" persisted Everson stubbornly. He was thinking of only a few minutes before when he had lain in his own bed with a pounding heart.

"It's too childish, sir," replied Finney. "I thought... I mean, it was like somebody... well, somebody was standing beside me."

Everson heard the communications man snicker. "Do you often have such—hallucinations?" he asked.

Finney emphatically shook his head in denial. "That was the first time, sir."

"I want you to have Dr. Morton look you over," said Everson conclusively. "And don't fail to let me know if the same kind of thing should happen again."

"But I'm not sick," protested Finney. "After all, a dream isn't a sickness. What am I supposed to do with Dr. Morton?"

"Just carry out my orders," Everson demanded. "Now go!"

Finney departed from the bridge, obviously unhappy about his assignment. Pensively, Everson followed him with his gaze until Scoobey poked into his field of awareness, standing beside him. "Don't think I'm a tinjesus martinet or something," he said, noting the disapproval in Scoobey's expression.

"I didn't ask you for your reasons," answered the first officer gravely.

"Do you know why I'm standing up here with you now, Walt? I had exactly the *same* nightmare that made Finney pop his poxy (Come unglued). Also I heard a funny noise. It was—alien—something not in the normal range of ship sounds we're accustomed to."

Scoobey returned an uneasy smile. The colonel was not one to chase after mental phantoms. His spaceflight experience as well as his human qualities and undaunted courage during his extensive years of service had made him a model of leadership in the eyes of the Terranian cadets. Nevertheless, Scoobey was convinced that Everson had made a lopsided assessment of the present situation. Even if two men had the same kind of nightmare at the same time, it could only be coincidence.

Everson had been startled out of his sleep only a few moments prior to Finney. Disconcertedly, Scoobey stared down off the bridge. Finney's cabin was much closer than Everson's!

But now that was ridiculous. The circular passage around the inner hull of the K-262 had been under continuous observation. If anybody had been paying Finney an unscheduled visit, he would have been seen. Scoobey's brows knit together. He must not let Everson's story get to him and make him nervous, too. After all, it could be that the colonel's fight on Eppan had shaken him up a bit more than he cared to let on. Scoobey was not able to suppress the suspicion that perhaps the specialized Arkonide rejuvenation treatments Everson had undergone might only be keeping his body young. On the other hand, his *mind* could be entering a stage of doddering senility.

"We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open." Everson's voice interrupted his train of thought. "To see if any similar occurrences are repeated. Ask the men about their dreams, even though they won't understand what you're talking about."

"Yes sir!" responded Scoobey somewhat sulkily. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, sir."

Everson descended the companionway ladder. Traversing a portion of the narrow catwalk below, he arrived at a door which bore a sign on it announcing that it was out of bounds to the ship's personnel. He knocked on the light metal panel.

A muffled voice responded: "Come in."

Everson opened the door and entered. Matal sat on his bunk with his legs drawn under him and stared

at him darkly.

"How do you feel?" Everson inquired.

"Like a prisoner," declared the Eppanian. "Or something worse.

"Could be," confirmed Everson. "We are in outer space, Mataal. That means that you cannot leave the ship. How is Ramirez doing as your language teacher?"

"Leave me alone," Mataal retorted in Arkonide.

Everson forced a smile. Cautiously he asked: "Did you leave your room anytime during the last few minutes?"

Mataal's body seemed to tense slightly. "No," he said. "Why do you ask?"

The colonel brushed off the question with a gesture of indifference. "You must try to adjust yourself to your situation here," he advised. "There's no need to be despondent. You will make friends on Earth and one day you will be able to return to Eppan."

Mataal did not deign to answer.

"Just consider for a moment," continued Everson carefully. "You have the unique opportunity to be witness to a cosmic drama. Your journey with us will take you centuries into the future. Presumably that's how long it may take for your race to develop its own spaceflight technology, if it ever comes to that. Goldstein informs me that many Eppanians have fallen into a sort of decadence, but you, Mataal, are an intelligent and spirited man. That's why you have my respect and friendship. This is all I can say for now."

He left the Eppanian in order to look up Goldstein. The young telepath sat at a work table, busily writing something. Everson chanced to look over the mutant's shoulder and saw a list of crew names on a piece of paper. Everson's own name was at the very top. He tried to figure why Goldstein was thus engaged but did not wish to confuse the young man just now with questioning. "I see that you're feeling a little better," he said.

The pallid telepath smiled. Goldstein folded the crew list carefully then tore it into small bits and threw them carelessly onto the deck. Then he met Everson's gaze. His eyes were unnaturally wide. "Sir," he whispered, "somebody is on board with us."

An icy wave ran up Everson's backbone. Here it was again—that indefinable sense of immanent danger. Had Goldstein perchance gone mad? His eyes glistened as though in delirium. His lips were dry and cracked. Suddenly he pushed back his chair and staggered into Everson with a shout of hysterical laughter. The colonel stepped back away from him in consternation.

Goldstein's face was twisted. "Somebody is on board!" he howled. "I've brought along a real nice surprise for you—a maddening surprise. I've sneaked Death itself on board the *Fauna*!"

Everson pushed him back onto the messed up bed. Determinedly he turned on the intercom over the work table. "Doctor!" he called into the microphone. "Dr. Morton! This is the Commander speaking. I want you in Goldstein's cabin—on the double! I think the youngster's gone off his rocker!"

A moment later the microspeaker crackled. The gruff voice of the ship's surgeon was heard. "I'm on my

way, sir."

Shortly thereafter Dr. Morton rushed into the cabin. He was as absently unkempt as ever, with his shirt tail fluttering and his dishevelled whiskers looking as though they'd been run over by a lawn-mower. His trousers were held up by thin straps, of an indefinable shade and twisted a number of times over his shoulders. His eyes were incredibly blue, peering brightly and cheerfully out of the thicket of his heavy eyebrows. But now when they turned to Goldstein they became grave. "He has a fever," the doctor announced.

"Death is on board this ship!" cried Goldstein. "Why don't you believe me? I am the telepath and I sense it. You have to do something, sir.

Scoobey appeared at the door. "I heard the commotion," he said. "What the devil's going on?"

Everson pointed to the mutant. "Another ghost observer, Walt."

Dr. Morton was preparing a hypodermic needle. Scoobey looked at him dubiously.

"It will calm him down," Morton explained as he wielded the needle like a weapon.

"Thanks, Doc," said Everson. "Walt, get back to your post.

When Scoobey was out of hearing range, Dr. Morton said: "It doesn't look good, sir."

Everson only nodded. Goldstein lay on his bed as though in a trance. The physician stomped out of the cabin. His heavy steps drummed audibly along the aluminium catwalk. As the sound faded away, a sense of dejection came over Everson.

* * * *

Gonzalez Ramirez entered his cabin and heaved a sigh of relief. A lean young man of medium height, he was a candidate for taking his final exams in the space academy, which were due shortly. Although he had accumulated only a meagre number of spaceflight hours so far, and only in a routine capacity at that, nevertheless there was a distinct difference between actual outer space experience and mere instructions in a classroom.

He sank down into his comfortable chair. After he had rested a few hours he would go to Mataal again in order to continue giving him his lessons in Arkonide. In grim amusement, Gonzalez recalled the difficulties he had experienced several years ago with the alien language.

He discarded his uniform jacket, revealing the dark hair on his arms. That had been somewhere in Mexico. How far away it seemed now. He had a vague recollection of hot summer days, glowing sands, shrill voices and dark-eyed children plus the smell of tortillas.

Involuntarily he seemed to savour the food of his native land. He leaned far back in his chair. Mexico—that was the past, a hot and gay-coloured world somewhere back on Earth. And the future? Ramirez' fingers passed over the star chart that was tacked down to his work table. *That* was the future.

He nodded in satisfaction, drifting into his private daydreams.

He heard a sound as though someone had opened the door of his cabin. He straightened up with a start. Had he dozed off? No one was in the room. Perhaps some visitor had looked in and thought better of awakening him. He jumped up quickly to look outside. But the long catwalk passage was empty and deserted.

Then he remembered Finney and what the latter had said to Everson came back to him: "...it was like somebody... well, somebody was standing beside me." Ramirez grinned. He was imagining things because of Finney, that was all. He went to his bunk and straightened the covers. Before his session with Mataal he would take a little nap.

Gonzalez Ramirez, the lean, friendly youngster from Mexico, of whom it was said in the Academy that he had his way with the girls... He stretched out finally and slowly closed his eyes.

Suddenly he was aware that the door was being opened! He heard it clearly and definitely—his body tensed. Nevertheless he kept his eyes shut and sought to convince himself that he was imagining it. He had just checked the passage outside and there had been nobody in sight. So he determined to keep his eyes closed and concentrate on the fact that he was mistaken. There was no other alternative if he did not want to doubt his sanity. He moved restlessly. Stubbornly he strove to take his thoughts back again to his homeland: the glowing hot desert sands, the shouts of children and the hot breath of the wind that came over the mountains. His mother's voice, admonishing him to be respectable, and the blustering of his father who always sat on the veranda and prattled in the warmth of the lowering sun.

He heard the door being closed, as though behind someone who had just entered.

He opened his eyes with a cry of terror. His pulse raced. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He trembled violently. His tongue touched his lips and found them dry.

There was nothing. The cabin was empty.

Hastily he got out of bed and slipped on his jacket. There could be no doubt that he was well on his way toward losing his mind. Like Finney! Finney? Was it possible that two healthy, normal men could go crazy at the same time and with the very same symptoms? Ramirez was just on the verge of going to see Dr. Morton when he came to a sudden halt. Somebody had played a trick on him.

Maybe they had the idea he was just any old inexperienced cadet whom they could throw a scare into without hardly trying. He knew how much the veteran spacemen loved to lead new swabbies and shavetails down the primrose path. They were just waiting for him to run to Dr. Morgan in consternation and beg for an examination. Finney's big act had been a part of the setup, in which the Commander himself was apparently also playing a part.

Well, they wouldn't take him in so easily. Having thus rationalized himself into a new state of calm, he went back to his bed. Of course he felt sure that they would try something again.

He did not have to wait long before he again became aware of the soft clicking of the door lock. Ramirez decided the best thing to do was to play deaf. It would put a damper on their gleeful spirits if he slept peacefully through every trick these pranksters could come up with in their attempt to spook him out.

The door slammed shut behind whoever had entered. The cadet suppressed a grin with an effort. Calmly

he lifted his head from the pillow and growled out his most frightening "Boo-oo-oo!"

Then he opened his eyes.

But it was already too late.

* * * *

Col. Marcus Everson used the railings of the companionway ladder to accelerate his climb to the bridge. The guppy was coming close to its first transition. Scoobey looked a bit dishevelled as he rushed about between the electronic consoles and computer equipment to monitor the coordinate preparations. "Everything's ready, sir," he called out as Everson appeared.

"Cut in the resonance-frequency absorber," ordered Everson.

This highly refined piece of equipment was able to keep alien tracking stations from detecting or tracing a spaceship's transition jumps. In other words, the frequency absorber was designed to outsmart its exact antithesis, the feared hypersens or, which normally could pinpoint the position of a ship when it emerged from hyperspace. As in the case of so many other technological advances in the Solar Empire, Terranians had Perry Rhodan to thank for initiating the use of this invaluable device.

"RFA now operating," confirmed Fashong, a diminutive Chinese astronaut with a big voice.

Everson threw himself into his pilot seat. The hydraulic support struts of the seat sighed softly. All ship systems suddenly sprang to life. "Cut off all radio communications," Everson commanded.

"Telecom off," came the confirming response from Marlo Landi, who was First Communications Officer.

"Ship Com off," said Ralf Zimmerman.

All that was left was the ship's intercom system, which did not depend on radio waves for its function.

During the next few minutes, Everson passed out his instructions and waited for his checkpoint callbacks to make sure the orders were being carried out.

Scoobey swung the support beam of his seat over next to Everson. "Ramirez hasn't shown up at his station," he whispered to him.

Everson scanned the personnel on the bridge. Of course the cadet did not have any direct function to perform during the hyperjump but his presence was mandatory. He was the recorder of the operational events, which was a continuous source of 'learning curve' information for improving the safety of space navigation.

"He'll have to shape up on his discipline around here or get bounced," grumbled Everson angrily. "He's probably still below with Mataal, all involved in a nice long discussion with that Eppanian." He raised his voice. "Alright, let's keep it rolling! Scoobey, check out the positronicon."

No human brain would have been able to handle the load of calculations that the electronic brains digested in a matter of seconds. Everson was well aware of the high degree of human dependence upon these machines. Perhaps one day it would be possible for Man to travel among the stars without mechanical assistance. Everson was thinking of the teleporters among the mutants, who had shown the way in this direction. Was it only for lack of understanding throughout the universe that this faculty was not further manifested in the species? Was existing space technology a mere patchwork by comparison? Everson was not able to answer his own questions.

He concentrated on the work before him.

"K-262 ready for transition!" announced Scoobey hoarsely.

The men inside the 200-foot sphere seemed to duck down at their stations. It was always a tense and exciting moment when a ship made its jump from the normal universe into that para-dimensional realm where time and space seemed to be meaningless.

"Countdown—180 seconds to transition," announced Fashong.

Everson listened to the countdown for a full minute. Then he said: "Watch the panel responses, Walt."

The First Officer scanned the flight console and countdown board with an experienced eye, as Fashong counted off the remaining seconds with asiatic composure.

At 60 seconds, Everson asked: "Scoobey?"

"Green!" came the answer.

"Fashong and the others?"

There was a countdown hold while all stations reported their readiness. Then he gave his final order. "Resume countdown, Fashong."

10 seconds later the *Fauna* broke from the normal structure of 3-dimensional space, unleashing forces which might have pulverized a satellite. During some timeless interval which no power in the universe was capable of measuring, the flight of the small spaceship was like that of a disembodied phantom. An infinitesimal moment and an eternity seemed to pass. All points of reference were gone while unreality manifested itself. Molecules and atoms disintegrated, floated apart and attenuated, only to take new form again as in some giant kaleidoscope that continuously formed new pictures for the observer.

Then they were through it.

"Position check!" ordered Everson immediately.

He received a quick confirmation that the transition had been accomplished as planned. The K-262 had arrived precisely in the calculated sector. In two more hyperjumps the ship would be within hailing distance of Sol.

Everson got up and permitted the hydro-struts of his extension seat to fold in. "Take over, Walt!" he called to Scoobey.

"Don't forget Ramirez," Scoobey reminded him.

Everson nodded. The Mexican had been on his mind all along. He decided not to call the youngster over the ship's com. It would be better to deal with him in person.

The cadet's enthusiasm for Mataal had to be brought under control. It wouldn't do for him to neglect his duties because of his side assignment.

Without hurrying, the colonel reached Mataal's cabin and entered. The Eppanian had been asleep and raised up slowly to see who it was. "You again?" he muttered indignantly.

"Was Ramirez here with you?"

"So far, no," replied Mataal. "But now that you've awakened me, you might as well send him in here, since my own movements seem to be restricted."

Everson disregarded the belligerent innuendo. He was concerned about his cadet. Where had he been this whole time? The colonel left Mataal and hurried along the catwalk passage. He knocked loudly on Ramirez' cabin door. Nothing. Everson silently voiced an expletive that embraced all cadets in general and then he banged the door open. The harsh command he had formulated stuck in his throat.

Ramirez lay sprawled on the deck near his bunk. The pillows were wrinkled and twisted as though a struggle had occurred here. With a heartfelt sense of relief, Everson discovered that the youngster was still alive.

The Mexican's eyes stared upward as though in death. There was something about him that was reminiscent of a baby bird fallen from its nest. His hair stood straight out from his head.

"Ramirez," he said, "what's this all about?"

The cadet was unable to answer. His body was rigid as though in epilepsy. Everson forced himself to be calm. For the second time in the course of only a few hours he called Dr. Morton on the intercom.

While waiting for the medico, he recalled Goldstein's words: "I've sneaked Death itself on board the *Fauna!*"

Did he mean *this*? —that he had brought a contagious disease with him on board? Everson shook his head. The planet Eppan had been carefully analysed before any landing there was undertaken.

Dr. Morton did not keep him waiting long. The physician pushed the commander to one side and silently bent over Ramirez. "He's still alive," he said.

Everson nodded. "But what can it be, Doc?"

"He's completely paralysed. I know of certain poisons that could produce such symptoms. Look here!" He moved his hand in front of Ramirez' eyes and the latter revealed no trace of reaction.

"But you don't really think he's been poisoned, do you?" queried Everson.

"Naturally not. Give me a hand, sir, and well get him on the bed."

Together they lifted the motionless body onto the bunk. The exertion made the doctor breathe heavily.

He started his examination at once.

"Don't you think he may have experienced a shock of some kind?" inquired Everson. "Or are you thinking of an unknown sickness?"

Dr. Morton played his fingers through his whiskers reflectively. The habitual twinkle had disappeared from his eyes. "There could be a number of causes," he answered. "It would be best to place this cabin under quarantine. You'd better let me give that Eppanian a thorough examination. Ramirez was with him quite frequently."

"Do whatever you see fit. Meanwhile I'm calling the crew together," announced Everson. He left the doctor alone with Ramirez. Shortly thereafter his voice rang out on the ship's P.A. system: "All hands assemble in Control Central, including off-duty personnel. I'll expect you in 3 minutes."

Scoobey came up to him, which was welcome just now. The First Officer's company served to dispel some of Everson's depression. Scoobey's enterprising nature and his ceaseless activity tended to generate optimism in any situation.

"What's with Ramirez?" asked Scoobey anxiously.

"He's completely paralysed. Mataal insists that the lad wasn't with him."

Fashong appeared on the command bridge and joined the other crewmen who were already assembled there. Everson waited until everybody was present. The ship's doctor came last. Among the regulation uniforms his hopelessly rumpled suit was an unusual contrast. Everson was aware of the expectant looks of his crewmen.

"I presume that each of you has been briefed on what happened to us on Eppan," the colonel began calmly. "You all know Goldstein's current condition. Dr. Morton can fill you in as to details. We were forced to take an Eppanian native on board the guppy, whom I could not present to you yet because of psychological reasons. You have to imagine, if you will, all the new impressions this man is being exposed to. He might become incapacitated by an overly abrupt confrontation with our civilization. So that's why I took all the precautions, which I know very well might be interpreted as secret melodrama by some people."

He paused in order to permit the rising murmur of comment to subside. "Now I'd like to inform you that our technician, Mr. Finney, had a dream a few hours ago, in which somebody came into his cabin. Granted, that's not so unusual. However, the strange part of it is that I also had a similar experience at just about the same time."

Embarrassed, Finney stared at the deck.

Everson broke up the ensuing comments. "Quiet!" he said. "There's more I have to tell you. I have just found Ramirez in his cabin. He is completely paralysed."

Everson hadn't expected that this news would cause an uproar, nor was he wrong. On the contrary, there was a complete silence. The astronauts stared at him as though also awaiting an answer to the mystery.

"We have to put Ramirez under quarantine," explained Dr. Morton. "With the exception of myself, nobody is allowed to see him unless by my expressed permission. I'm asking all of you to watch

yourselves. The slightest sign of any symptom of sickness must be reported to me at once."

"I'll bet this has something to do with that alien," said Zimmerman.

There was a threatening undertone in his voice which alerted Everson. Zimmerman was a sturdy and taciturn type with an angular face cut into planes of stubborn hardness. His thin lips and crooked nose gave him an almost brutal appearance. As he spoke, his grey eyes seemed to glare almost maliciously.

An ominous murmur of agreement was heard among the men. Although it was still only an incipient indication of resentment against the presence of Mataal on board, nevertheless it seemed clear that any further manifestations of this mystery could generate an angry rebellion against the Eppanian.

Everson smiled imperceptibly but with a tiny frown as he turned to Zimmerman. "You know how thoroughly our specialists have examined the world of Eppan. It is absolutely out of the question that Ramirez' illness has any connection with Mataal."

But Zimmerman intuitively sensed the support he was getting from the other crewmen around him. "Ramirez was always hanging around that alien," he persisted, stubbornly.

Everson could have controlled him with a simple command but this might easily arouse more suspicion and doubt. Perhaps a little psychology would clear up the situation. "Zimmerman," he said with a mocking grin, "is that frightened sound I hear the chattering of your kneebones?"

A general wave of chuckling and laughter greeted his words. Zimmerman reddened in anger. Yet any further remarks from him on the subject might well give the impression that he was actually afraid. Everson knew that this was only a temporary victory for the purpose of gaining time. Should further incidents related to the mystery occur, this general state of unrest would worsen.

Now Honda Inoshiro stepped forward. He was simultaneously their Japanese Navigator and the master chessplayer on board. "Do you believe there may be some connection between Goldstein's ailment and Ramirez' present sickness?"

"I can't tell you that yet," Dr. Morton answered him. "But it's not impossible."

"Now get back to your stations," ordered Everson. "And I want you to follow Dr. Morton's instructions to the letter!" He turned to Scoobey. "Have Landi set up a telecom connection with Earth. I want to report to Rhodan what's going on around here."

About one hour later, Scoobey appeared in Everson's cabin.

"What are you trying to do?" snapped the colonel harshly. "Get in some track training? What's wrong with the intercom?"

Scoobey did not smile. He seemed troubled and depressed. "We haven't been able to transmit any radio messages to Earth," he announced.

"That's not possible," retorted Everson. "It's brand new equipment and it's been checked out thoroughly. There's no chance it could break down on us at this stage."

His First Officer repeated himself like a machine: "We have not been able to transmit, sir."

In spite of a gloomy foreboding, Everson persisted: "Can't Landi isolate the trouble?"

"No way," answered Scoobey disconsolately. "You know he's an expert and if anybody could make a fault isolation, he could." He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else but apparently decided to remain silent.

Everson looked at him sharply. "What else, Walt? Speak up!"

Scoobey spilled it out: "Sir—that transmitter had to be tampered with deliberately to make it go off the air. I believe it's sabotage."

"You believewhat ...!?" exclaimed Everson in a half-whisper.

"I believe that somebody on board the *Fauna* is trying to keep us from contacting Earth. They want to keep Terrania from knowing what's going on here."

"And who do you have in mind?"

"Mataal!"

Everson thought: Maybe—but the hooker is that the Eppanian doesn't know beans about advanced technical equipment. Aloud he said: "You have to find positive proof of that, Walt."

4/ THE RAVINGS OF A MADMAN

The long-drawn out human cry echoed lingeringly throughout the ship.

Everson swept the open book before him clear off the table. His chair clattered backwards onto the deck. In two long strides he was out of his cabin and he was joined by other startled crewmen as they burst from their own quarters. Up on the bridge of the Control Central the astronauts on duty had left their stations and now hung over the railing like so many giant birds of a feather, craning their necks to see what the matter was. Everson was trying to figure from what direction the cry had emerged when he crashed into Finney.

"What the heck's happening, sir," asked the technician. "Over here, sir!" a voice called out from a point farther along the catwalk.

Everson ran forward, followed by Finney.

The one who had called to him was Poul Weiss, a technician. He was standing in the open doorway leading into Stanford's cabin, his face showing a bloodless pallor while he mumbled incoherently. The more impassive Chinese, Fashong, was standing near him and now signalled to Everson, pointing wordlessly inside toward Stanford.

As Everson entered the room he saw that the 28-year-old biologist was sitting collapsed in his chair. In his hand were several playing cards. George Stanford had not been playing alone. His partner lay on the

deck nearby. It was Gordon Short, Navigator, 46 years old. His face was twisted into an unnatural grimace that was like a supernatural mask.

Weiss pushed past Everson and took the playing cards from Short's rigid grasp. Almost all hands had shown up by now and were crowding around the door or into the room. Weiss held the cards up to Everson. There was a mockery in his voice. "Just look at the beautiful hand the lucky stiff was holding!" he blurted out. "Yessir, gents, a real set of cards!" He opened his fingers and let the cards fall to the deck, significantly.

Everson pushed Weiss aside. He wished desperately that he could think of something by way of explanation to the men. He felt their grim surveillance as they stood there looking at him.

He finally turned and faced them in all frankness. "They're still both alive," he said, somewhat helplessly.

No one answered. Finally Dr. Morton broke through the wall of silent onlookers.

"Let me through!" he shouted excitedly as he pushed beyond them into the cabin.

"He wants to hoist another yellow flag for his quarantine," said somebody scornfully.

Was it Weiss? Or Wolkov? Maybe Sternal? Everson was unable to decide.

"He don't have that many flags!" came another snide remark.

Everson turned to the Second Navigator, Werner Sternal. "Give the doctor a hand here," he ordered.

The man obeyed. He and Morton lifted Stanford onto the bunk.

"It will be best to take Short out of here," suggested the physician. "It makes me a little nervous to have two afflicted men together in the same room."

"Good!" Everson agreed. "Sternal can give you a hand with your work, Doc." He raised his voice for the others. "Now we have 3 men to replace, so some of the work is going to double up. Two of you men will be needed for the next transition hop, which is coming up shortly. If each of us leans a little harder on the wheel I know we'll get there. I'm confident that no man is going to lose his nerve because after all none of these men are dead. I'm sure Dr. Morton will be able to cure them of their paralysis. It's senseless to draw any hasty conclusions. Now I want you men to discipline yourselves and keep a stiff backbone at all times because you're going to have to realize that any sitdown around here is only going to make things worse. In view of the situation I'll expect all of you to keep your eyes open. From here on, the ship's radio com will remain in constant operation. Landi is going to double his efforts to get through a signal to Earth. If we succeed in reaching Terrania with a message, Rhodan will send us a ship to assist us."

Zimmerman pushed his way to the front of the crowd. In his eyes was a look of open rebellion. "We demand that Mataal be placed under guard immediately," he said. "We know he's the one behind all this."

"We will lay hands on no one around here without proof," retorted Everson glacially. "Naturally, I'll have a word with the Eppanian."

Zimmerman did not seem inclined to be satisfied with this information but he drew back before

Everson's stern gaze. The colonel knew that even Scoobey suspected the gladiator. But, he asked himself, how could an alien be clever enough to move about in the guppy without being seen and not only paralyze three men but also knock out the telecom installation? Everson could not deny that a finger of suspicion did point in Mataal's direction—yet it just seemed illogical to express the fact. If there was any connection at all between the malfunction of the transmitter and the paralysis of the men, there would have to be somebody else at work here. But no matter how penetratingly the colonel probed the matter in his mind he could not imagine who the perpetrator might be. He regretted the fact that Goldstein was out of the action. The telepath would have been able to probe the thoughts of the others. Everson was reminded again of Goldstein's strange assertion that he had brought Death on board with him. Was it really just delirious praffle or was there more behind that statement than met the eye? Whom had Goldstein brought on board with him—even though indirectly—if it had not been Mataal?

Now as before, Everson was forced to consider the possibility of some mysterious sickness which Doc Morton would pin down sooner or later.

"We really should place Mataal under guard," said Scoobey, interrupting his train of thought, "even if it's only to keep the peace around here. That is my recommendation, sir."

"I'll think it over," replied the Commander.

"What's our plan of action, sir, if still more men get hit?" persisted Scoobey. "I mean, how would we carry out the second transition?"

Undoubtedly this was the most vital issue—if it should actually come to that. With any less than 10 astronauts it was practically impossible to operate the *Fauna*. Admittedly, when in free fall the ship could even be handled by one man, but the major task of making a hyperjump could only be achieved through the coordinated action of a full crew—or at least more than 9 or 10 men. The failure of the space telecom system was a worse handicap than Everson had wanted to admit. It was not possible for them to ask the Earth for help. Cut off completely like this, they were the helpless victims of fate.

"That we must avoid at all costs," was Everson's answer.

But how, nobody knew.

* * * *

When the colonel returned to his cabin, he saw Goldstein sitting at his work table. Everson overlooked the obvious infraction of regulations. The young man snickered as though he were irrational.

"What do you want, Goldstein?" inquired Everson uneasily. "You know you shouldn't leave your room. Dr. Morton has diagnosed you as sick—you shouldn't be running around." He spoke to him as he might have to an impudent child.

The thin mutant waved his hand carelessly. "Morton thinks I'm crazy," he said, while pointing significantly to his head. When Everson was about to deny this, he added: "Naturally, so do you."

"All you need is rest, son. Everything will be set straight again when we get back to the Earth."

"The Earth?" Goldstein smiled his amusement. "You don't really believe we'll ever see the Earth again, do you?"

There it was again—that certain sense of threatening danger. "What do you really know?" he asked the telepath.

Goldstein's fingers clenched inward. His eyes were wild and unkempt strands of hair dangled on his forehead. "Why do you keep questioning me!?" he yelled out suddenly. "I didn't come here to answer questions!"

Everson admonished: "Get hold of yourself, Goldstein. Did someone perhaps send you to me?"

Goldstein's hands wandered aimlessly across the desk top. "I'm afraid!" he cried out. His entire face had broken out with drops of sweat. The veins in his neck were swollen as if ready to burst. "I'm afraid that it will come again, like it did on Eppan. It will come again and it will kill me." He broke into an uncontrolled fit of sobbing.

"What are you talking about, son?" asked the colonel urgently.

Goldstein trembled as though under an attack of fever. Something terrible was going on inside of him. "It was in me, deep down inside! Then it waited and watched. And if I talk it will come again, do you understand? It's just sitting there somewhere, waiting in ambush to get me. Is it inside of *you*, sir? Yes, it can be there, too, and..." He seemed to collapse across the desk.

Though shaken, Everson remained silent. Some kind of horrible experience had gotten the mutant into this state. Could this madman's ravings be taken seriously at all? Was he speaking factually? Were these the mutterings of a maniac? Or was there a little bit of both in his wild story? The responsibility for the ship weighed heavily on Everson. Upon his decisions would depend whether or not they were to reach the Earth safely. He knew how helpless he was at the moment. However, he must never reveal his helplessness to the others. Above all, Goldstein must be prevented from babbling his insanities to the crew.

"On your feet, Goldstein," he said. "I'll take you back." The mutant staggered upward feebly and Everson had to support him. Outside, the colonel noted that all cabin doors in his range of vision stood open. He'd have to make an exception in the case of Goldstein and Mataal, insisting that they keep their doors closed, since it was best to isolate them as much as possible. He pushed Goldstein along the ramp. They passed Finney's cabin. The dark-haired technician lay on his bunk and looked out at them. He saw Goldstein's limp figure supported in Everson's arms and his lips parted as though to express his concern. But the colonel hurried onward and finally they reached Goldstein's quarters.

"The ship's com is in continuous operation," Everson told him. "If you don't feel well you can put in a call to Dr. Morton."

The mutant did not seem to understand him in the least. He swayed across the deck to his bunk. Everson closed the door. He recognized the fact that there was nothing he could do—except to wait.

* * * *

Ralph Zimmerman, Second Com Officer on board the guppy, looked up at the chronometer that was on the bulkhead wall directly above him. In a few minutes his duty watch would be ended. First Com Officer Marlo Landi would be taking over for him. So far Landi had sought in vain to find the trouble with the malfunctioning transmitter.

Zimmerman noticed that Walt Scoobey was sitting all hunched over in his pilot seat. The First Officer's eyes were heavily bloodshot. The recent events on board had placed a heavy burden on him. Zimmerman cursed under his breath. Had Everson gone blind? Couldn't he see that all these incidents had happened since the presence of the Eppanian on the ship?

For Zimmerman it was an open and shut case. Mataal was behind it all. He had to stop this underhanded alien from doing any more harm. He'd have to do something on his own. He might even be the next on Mataal's list but he wasn't going to let him get that far. Zimmerman knew he'd have his opportunity in the next few minutes. There were only a few men up here on the bridge. He looked down at the catwalk below. One thing dangerous to his plan was the constantly open ship's communication system. His hands moved with a practiced familiarity across the master keyboard of the intercom in front of him. In a few minutes when Landi relieved him, either one of two things could happen. Either the First Com Officer would immediately return to his repair work or he would get involved in a routine checkout again. Zimmerman decided to take the risk. He set the main intercom switch at a neutral position. The ship's com was now deactivated.

He heard the footsteps of the change of watch on the aluminium companionway. Scoobey relinquished the pilot seat to Everson. The two officers exchanged a few words that Zimmerman couldn't catch. Landi was the last to arrive. He moved at once to the telecom system.

Zimmerman grinned at Landi, who was already lost in a wilderness of wires and transistors. He stretched and yawned like a man who was happy to be at the end of his shift. Nobody watched him go when he slowly left the bridge.

He remembered one time during his school-days when he had gone to thrash the top student in the next grade above him because he had slandered him behind his back. He had run through the long hallway while his footsteps echoed away into the empty classrooms. It was just at lunchtime, he remembered. His quarry was leaning against the base of a pillar with several of his friends and was idly munching on a sandwich. He was a chubby, red-cheeked fellow with a pair of quick, mousy eyes that seemed to regard his opponent with lofty condescension. After the bloody scuffle, Zimmerman had received a severe scolding.

He smiled at the recollection as he reached the catwalk. He saw that he would have to go by three open cabins which would probably be occupied. Once he had gotten past them he would have arrived at his goal: Mataal. At the first door he was lucky. Constantin Wolkov lay on his bunk, sleeping with his mouth open. The next cabin was empty. No doubt Dealcour was with one of his buddies involved in a game of chess. Zimmerman nodded with satisfaction and continued onward. Now all he had to do was just get past the final hurdle without any trouble.

"Hello, Ralf!" Werner Sternal called out to him when he was almost past the door.

Zimmerman stopped. He forced himself to look into the other's cabin guilelessly while thinking desperately how he could fool him as quickly as possible. Zimmerman's appearance seemed to be a break in the monotony that Sternal welcomed. But Zimmerman was wondering how long it would be

before Everson took note of the fact that the intercom system was off the air.

"Come on in," Sternal invited him.

He searched the Navigator's greenish eyes for the slightest spark of suspicion but Sternal was actually looking for some company.

Defensively he stretched both of his arms. "Gosh, I'm dog tired," he said, excusing himself. "I thought I'd go stretch out for awhile."

"You losing the wind in your sails, Ralf?" asked Sternal with a sympathetic smile. "Your port is still halfway around the ramp!"

This was the critical moment, thought Zimmerman. "The Commander ordered me to check all the doors," he replied. He put a note of complaint in his voice to show he wasn't happy about the extra assignment. "All of them are standing open."

"All but my neighbour's," returned Sternal sarcastically. Zimmerman saw with relief that he had put Sternal at his ease. Without showing any haste, he continued onward. There was nobody to be seen. He stopped in front of Mataal's cabin. He listened. Then he yanked the latch open.

It was completely dark inside. The Eppanian must have turned off the lights. In the light of the passageway that came into the room, Zimmerman thought he could make out the shadowy outlines of a figure on the bed. He moved into the room and closed the door behind him. Pitch darkness surrounded him. He remained where he was for the moment. He ran his tongue over lips that had become dry with the strain of his mounting excitement. Then he groped his way forward. Why didn't the Eppanian move? Was he asleep? A wave of rage and hatred came over him, clouding his reason. He was filled with a blind urge to destroy.

"Mataal!" he said threateningly. "Show yourself!"

"What do you want?" The words rang out of the darkness in cumbersome Arkonese.

Zimmerman guided himself toward the voice. The sound of it spurred him, driving him forward wildly. The one obsession that he must destroy this Eppanian made him throw caution to the winds. Gritting his teeth in rage, he groped ahead for the hated quarry.

Unexpectedly the lights flashed on. For a moment Zimmerman was blinded but his attitude left no doubt as to his intentions. Mataal leapt from the bed and braced his back against the wall. His dark eyes glittered alertly. "Get out of here!" he said coldly.

Marshalling his lumberjack strength, Zimmerman hurled himself forward in order to press the Eppanian against the wall. He crashed into it but with empty hands.

He took a couple of swift blows to the kidneys and gasped in pain. Before he had even turned himself on he found his whole plan endangered. Desperately he charged the other, getting a deadlock around his legs and both of them crashed to the deck. Zimmerman got on top of his opponent and sought to choke him but Mataal brought his legs up and sent him sailing. He instinctively caught the other's foot, however, and struggled to kick back. They broke and both men jumped to their feet.

Zimmerman realized that he had underestimated his antagonist. He raised his fists and charged at him.

The yellow face before him remained utterly composed. Zimmerman's wild haymaker expended itself harmlessly against Mataal's raised arms. Then a counterblow slammed him clear across the room. Zimmerman saw red. Again he charged.

The cabin door flew open and he halted his attack.

It was the colonel. His face was grave and weary. He held a paralysing aimed at Zimmerman, who looked at him defiantly. The communications man's body pained him in various places. He was breathing heavily.

"You poor fool," said Everson pityingly. "Mataal could have killed you any time he pleased. What ever put this crazy idea into your mind?"

Hatefully, Zimmerman pointed to the Eppanian. "He's at the bottom of everything that's happened! Until he came on board we weren't having any trouble at all!"

Everson replaced the weapon in his pocket. "You told me that before," he reminded him, "But you have no proof. You wanted to kill this man merely on the basis of a suspicion. You know what that means. It's the end of your career and on Earth you'll go before a court martial."

Zimmerman yelled at him bitterly. "Then I hope you're the next customer your buddy here decides to take care of! If you ask me, you don't want to admit what's going on here!"

"Go to your quarters, Zimmerman!" ordered Everson roughly.

Zimmerman limped out of the cabin. Everson looked thoughtfully at Mataal, who had sat down on the edge of his bunk.

"I'm grateful for your interference," said the Eppanian.

"I believe I'm indebted to you," countered Everson. "You might have killed him easily. His action was totally irresponsible and he will have to take the consequences, once he's back on Earth. Of course there is some possibility that he's right. Mataal, do you have anything to do with my men who have become paralysed?"

"What purpose would it serve to protest my innocence? You'd only continue to suspect me," argued the extraterrestrial.

"Yes," admitted Everson, "you're probably right. These incidents could also have come about without premeditation. Do you know of any disease or ailment on Eppan that could produce such symptoms?"

"I have already explained to Dr. Morton that we know of no such sickness."

"We can only hope," said Everson, "that no more of the men will be affected by it."

But he was to be bitterly deceived in this vain hope. Because the next victim was Henry Dealcour.

"Check!" said Dealcour triumphantly. He placed his bishop diagonally in a position to block Inoshiro's king.

The eyelids of the diminutive Japanese lifted perceptibly. He sat at the playing board like a miniature Buddha. "You play very well," he said courteously. "But I should warn you that in four moves you'll be in check-mate."

Dealcour stared at the board. From his point of view his pieces had a better freedom of movement than those of his opponent. Inoshiro moved a knight in front of Dealcour's king and simultaneously brought a castle into danger that had previously been protected by another knight.

"Apparently you have a point," admitted Dealcour reluctantly. "Honda, you're an old fox. But one of these days I'm going to make you sweat." He moved his king to safety, only to note that the next move by Inoshiro's queen would get him into further difficulty. "OK, I give up," he said resignedly. As the Japanese only chuckled and began to put the playing pieces away, Dealcour stood up and looked peevishly at his watch. "I still have 3 hours to go, so maybe I'll catch some sleep." He gave his small opponent a pat on the shoulder and left the cabin.

Henry Dealcour was a medium-sized man with red hair. Like the majority of red-headed people, the shape of his head was distinctive as were his aquiline features. He had a sharp mind which was very seldom influenced by emotions. Of a somewhat reserved and reticent nature, the Japanese was the only one with whom he had established a tacit friendship.

When he arrived in his quarters he immediately retired to rest. Placing his hands behind his head, he mentally reviewed the game with Inoshiro and attempted to figure out where his basic mistake had occurred.

It was then that something emerged from the wall near his bed!

Almost any other man would have been gripped with shock and it was only Dealcour's intellectual *sangfroid* that rescued him temporarily from a similar reaction. This in spite of the fact that his heart almost stopped beating. It seemed as if the thin metal of the wall had become transparent, or non-existent, in the place where the Thing came through.

Dealcour made a lightning swift move and pressed the call button of the permanently operating ship's intercom. "Sir!" he cried out sharply. "This is Dealcour. Something is coming through the wall here. Hurry!" Fear clutched at his voice and seemed to shut it off.

"Hang on!" came Everson's instant answer.

Transfixed, Dealcour could only stare at the Thing. It had detached itself completely from the wall now, a scintillating transparent shadow without apparent substance. What could it be? Dealcour had never seen anything like it before in his life. Panic finally gripped him. He wanted to yell, to bellow aloud in his horror, even to breathe—but his lips remained silent.

The incredible apparition was already on top of him.

* * * *

The three men came in together. On their faces was a mixture of anger and barely suppressed fear. Everson looked up at them. There were shadows under his eyes and his lanky figure seemed to have lost some of its military posture. "Well?" he asked.

Finney appointed himself as the spokesman but Sternal and Weiss were obviously in agreement.

"Dealcour was victim number four," said the technician. "Now we have definite proof that somebody on board is responsible for paralysing the men. Dealcour saw something before it got to him. What are you going to do about it, sir?"

"It could just be possible that Dealcour was having hallucinations," retorted Everson. "Sternal, you were the one who fell down on your job. You were assigned to keep an eye on Mataal but you let Zimmerman get to him and you only told me about it when you saw that Zimmerman's plan wasn't going to pay off."

Sternal appeared to be flabbergasted. "I thought I was only supposed to see that Mataal stayed in his room.

Before Everson could answer, Poul Weiss entered the argument. "A few minutes before Dealcour put in that distress call he was with Inoshiro. They were playing chess, and Honda was anything but under the impression that Dealcour was delirious. He would have had to notice any change in him at the time."

"Alright," said Everson calmly, "let's suppose that some member of the crew wants to put each of us out of commission, one at a time. What would be the object? If more men are knocked out we won't be able to make any transition jumps—and that would be as bad for the perpetrator as it would be for the rest of us."

"The guilty one doesn't necessarily have to be a crew member," interjected Finney.

Everson shook his head stubbornly. "Oh no, gentlemen! You're making things easy for yourselves. I see that you want to get after the Eppanian again. Sternal wasn't able to prove that Mataal was wandering around in the *Fauna* without an escort or supervision."

Finney spoke up. "Dealcour claimed that something *camethrough the wall* into his room. So Mataal doesn't have to go by any normal route when he wants to move around in the ship."

"You must be joking," said the colonel. "The next thing you'll be telling me is that the Eppanian walks up and down the walls. Your imagination is running away with you—or is it fear?"

Everson knew only too well that it was fear. The feeling that any one of them could be next in line to be found lying helpless and paralysed in his room. But it was also the fear of reducing the personnel on board, which was synonymous with being unable to make a transition jump. And then, too, there was the ever-growing sense of helplessness resulting from the malfunction of the telecom equipment. For the commander of the outfit there was still another problem: to maintain calm and order. A general panic would only make things worse.

Sternal asked permission to speak. "We wanted to propose something to you," he said. "We have an

idea of how we can prevent anyone's being jumped on when they're alone."

"Keep talking," said Everson.

"We suggest that starting right now all hands stay in the Control Central. There's enough room in that area. Let nobody go anywhere in the ship alone. If it's necessary to go to other parts of the ship, at least two men should go together. That way we can keep up a group surveillance. Naturally this includes Mataal and Goldstein. We've already talked to Dr. Morton and he's agreed that the ones who have been paralysed can also be brought to the bridge."

Everson considered. It was a very good idea. But what would come of it if they were all in a bunch and still more of these incidents occurred? With all of them crowded into a tight space together, each one watching the other, with nerves at the breaking point—anything could happen. But Everson knew that he would have to go along with it.

Faced with a number of undesirable alternatives, he could only choose the best of them. The men expected him to take some kind of action. Their disillusionment would be all the greater, however, if the plan should fail. Under no circumstances could he let these spacemen lounge around with nothing to do. They had to be occupied in order to divert their thoughts. But this was not the greatest problem that faced Everson. The latter was simply stated: he had to bring the ship back to Earth!

"You may go," he said. "Your proposal is a good one." He waited until they had gone and then he leaned toward the intercom microphone. "Attention!" he called out. "This is the Commander speaking. Starting immediately, special security measures will be in effect. All hands report to the bridge. Dr. Morton will take charge of the disabled men accordingly. No one will be permitted to go anywhere alone on ship board. This order applies to Mr. Scoobey as well as to myself. Since the Eppanian will also be with us I want you to remember that this man is from a race of people who are far behind us in their development. The alien is under a great enough psychological strain as it is and I don't want it to be worsened by any unnecessary actions on your part. Dr. Morton and two off-duty astronauts will bring Goldstein and the other disabled men up onto the bridge. I am depending on you to remain calm and orderly because from this moment on I'll have to take top disciplinary measures against any insubordination. You have 10 minutes in which to carry out these orders. Thank you."

When he emerged from his cabin he met Scoobey on the circular ramp.

"Do you think that was a good idea?" asked the first officer.

Everson made room for Weiss and Finney to get by as they carried the paralysed figure of Short along the cat-walk. "Well, what do you think?" he answered with a counter-question.

Scoobey's brown eyes peered up at him. "You're waiting too long before making the second transition, sir," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Under normal circumstances it would be behind us already. What do you think will happen if we stay around here much longer in this deserted corner of the universe?"

Everson was vexed by the indecisiveness that had come over him. Was it actually a desire to await the development of further events that had hindered him from ordering preparations for the second hyperjump? Or had he simply become an inflexible and unresponsive old man who could be rocked off his orbit by the slightest incident? Wasn't it true that his present actions were the result of instigations by the crew? Even now, if he gave the order to go into transition, it would be traceable to the fact that Scoobey—not he—had been the causative factor.

Everson stared at his hands. They were firm, suntanned and finely veined. They were steady, completely devoid of any trembling. With these hands he had guided the K-262 over light-years of distance in perfect safety. Was all that behind him now? Was he standing here at the end of his prime, a used up, hollowed-out old spacer who lost his legs at the slightest jolt in the old deck-plates? Was he really that helpless? *No, old boy*, thought Everson. *No more than anybody else on board.*

Aloud he said: "We will carry out the second transition. We can't wait any longer."

"Very good, sir," replied Scoobey, satisfied.

When the two of them reached the bridge they found that Dr. Morton had just completed his transportation of his patients. He appeared to be just about exhausted. The men who were standing about in the area were peculiarly silent. Perplexed, Everson's gaze swept the ailing men who lay on the gallery deck. The physician had covered them so that only their faces were visible. The colonel realized at once what had produced the heavy silence among the crewmen. The number of paralysed victims had been increased by one.

He had just caught a glimpse of the powerful, angular face but in the same instant he knew who was lying there: Ralf Zimmerman.

Dr. Morton's voice came to him as though through a heavy veil: "It must have happened just before your announcement. Fashong found him like that. Same condition as the others."

This was the 5th victim—only a few hours after Dealcour. Everson looked at Mataal, who crouched in the farthest corner. The Eppanian's dark eyes met his gaze steadily but there was nothing there but the dumb defiance of a beast in captivity.

Slowly, Everson moved to his control seat. No one spoke. A few men softly cleared their throats. The humming of the equipment filled the bridge area. The astronauts went silently to their places. Goldstein tittered inanely. It was a signal.

"Make preparations for the second hypertransition," Everson ordered.

Deft hands operated the console switches at various posts. Voices rang out now and indicator lights began to flicker. Once more the moods of fear, panic, horror and anger were overcome. A breath of courage and confidence pervaded the small group of men. Only the five paralysed victims and the mutant, Goldstein, who lay on the deck muttering incoherently to himself, gave an indication that there would be a revisitation of what had gone before.

The fear, the anger, the panic and the horror.

6/ AND THEN THERE WERE 9!

Marcus Everson, Commander of the K-262, brushed the back of his hand across his sweat-dampened brow. His vague sense of uneasiness had passed away, replaced by a feeling of deep satisfaction. The

swing-arm of his pilot's seat swung over next to Scoobey.

The smaller officer smiled his relief. "We made it," he said. "Coordinates are right on the nose. We're almost home, sir.

Now only one more hypertransition lay between the ship and the Earth. Every one of the 10 able-bodied men had given their best in order to compensate for the missing ones who were incapacitated. Everson was filled with a new spurt of confidence. He decided to make the next jump as soon as possible. Maybe by then Landi might even be able to get the telecom back on the air.

Everson bounded from his seat. The First Com Officer sat hunched over his equipment, only the black hair of his head showing above the back of his chair. As Everson came around beside him, Landi appeared to be deeply engulfed in the contemplation of the defensive circuits.

"You'll soon have it back in shape, Landi," said Everson and he patted the communications man on the shoulder. Under the pressure of his hand, Landi toppled from his chair. In the process of falling, he gyrated about with a horrible slowness, permitting Everson to catch a full glimpse of the twisted face that stared at him in silent fear. While the colonel stood rooted there in shock, the newest victim finally sank down onto the deck.

After awhile, Everson's hoarse voice broke the silence. "We might as well all return to our cabins," he said.

Landi lay on his back. The overhead lights glittered in his wide-open eyes. Dr. Morton dragged him finally to the group of other afflicted men and covered him with a blanket

Everson chanced to notice a white plastic strip lying under the radio equipment. Hastily he bent down to retrieve it. Here was evidence that the transmitter had been in operation if only for a brief moment. All outgoing radio messages were recorded on these narrow bands. Had Landi succeeded in putting through a signal just before he was struck down? Had he completed the necessary repairs? A short examination proved to the colonel that his hopes were unfounded-also that any radio contact with Earth was still an unresolved question. He turned his attention to the message strip. The one sentence that he could read made him realize that the paralysis of the men could no longer be attributed to a sickness.

Somebody was on board who was systematically reducing the number of his able-bodied spacemen. The words Everson saw were a bitter mockery. The one short moment in which the transmitter had apparently been back on the air again had been used to hurl a false message into the void.

Once more his eyes traced out the deliberate lie: *...everything on board is in order... K-262... Everson.*

He stuffed the strip into the pocket of his uniform. He went over in his mind who had been closest to Landi during the transition. Wolkov's position was just to the right of the communications seat and slightly behind it. Sternal's seat was directly next to Landi's.

Before Everson could say anything, the automatic ship alarm began to howl. Its shrill tones grated on his over-wrought nerves. Two red lights flashed on the trouble board.

"Sir!" exclaimed Scoobey despairingly. "Two of our engines are out!"

Everyone shouted and chattered in confusion. Everson felt an overwhelming urge to just go back to his

seat and let things fall as they might. The *Fauna*'s propulsion system was multiply secured against any kind of accident or breakdown. It was improbable that two of the units would go out at the same time. If this were a case of sabotage, then Everson was faced with a riddle—because nobody had moved out of the bridge area.

He took a deep breath. He had to send two men into the module sections where the two drive units were located. First and foremost was Finney, who was his top technician. Wolkov would be a good second.

As Scoobey cut off the sirens, Everson broke into the ensuing lull of noise, calling both Finney and Wolkov. The two warning lights on the trouble board glared from behind the two men like a pair of malevolent eyes. "I want you two to try and find the glitch in those drive units and see if you can fix them. And be careful! Ship's com is wide open, remember, so that you can contact us at any moment."

Without visible concern, Finney asked: "What if we have to go outside?"

"Then you go outside," said Everson.

Finney nodded indifferently. Together with Wolkov he climbed down the companionway ladder. Everson watched them until they had disappeared from view on a lower ladder behind the crew quarters. Then he turned to the remaining men,

"Each of you knows what to make of the situation," he said. "But I still expect you to hold onto your nerves. We still have no definite information concerning the engine damage. Most probably Finney and Wolkov can repair whatever it is."

He nodded to Sternal, who was staring at the trouble board as though transfixed. "Sternal, during the last hyperjump you were sitting next to Landi. Did you notice anything unusual?"

"No sir," replied the navigator. "Only when Landi fell out of his chair." The memory of the scene made him swallow hard.

Everson turned to the bewhiskered physician. "Dr. Morton, do you think it's possible that any one of us would be capable of paralyzing the men? Is there even the slightest hint of such a possibility?"

"This kind of paralysis could be produced by someone having the proper equipment and the necessary medical knowledge," admitted the doctor gravely. "But who among us would be excluded from that prerequisite? We've all taken various specialized courses designed to help us take care of ourselves if stranded on some remote planet. Still, I would say that the guilty one is not to be looked for among the crew." Dr. Morton reflected a moment. "There are certain poisons, of course, that could produce similar symptoms. But several of those I've examined—especially Landi—show no evidence of having had any kind of poison introduced into their bodies. Besides, all my tests on each patient enable me to state with certainty that poisoning is not involved here. There is much more evidence of some kind of a shock, even though that approach gives rise to a whole lot more riddles."

"What are we still waiting for, sir?" yelled Weiss suddenly. His outstretched hand pointed to Mataal's motionless figure. "You've just heard that nobody in the crew could have caused what happened!"

"Alright, Weiss, cool it—quiet down," Everson retorted sternly. "How are you going to explain the breakdown of the telecom system or the two space engines? How would the Eppanian have accomplished that kind of technical sabotage?"

The atmosphere was highly charged with tension. The men watched each other warily and with rising suspicion. But their greatest suspicion was aimed at Mataal.

Everson made a quick decision. "Dr. Morton will place the Eppanian under sedation," he said. "For some time he will be in a condition of deep sleep. If during that period any more of these mysterious events occur, then we can be convinced once and for all that he has had nothing to do with paralysing the men."

He repeated his statement in the Eppanian language. The extraterrestrial looked at him indifferently.

"Naturally I had nothing to do with these occurrences," came his reply. His slitted eyes were unusually narrow. "But before you try to force an injection I wish to say that I accept your suggestion."

Everson nodded to Dr. Morton but just then Fashong let out a cry of alarm behind him. He whirled around. Both of the red warning lights had gone out on the trouble board.

"But that's not possible!" the colonel gasped inadvertently. "Finney and Wolkov have hardly had a chance to begin their repair work!" A frightening suspicion came to him. He was at the intercom mike in two steps. "Finney!" he roared. "Wolkov! Do you hear me?"

An uncanny stillness ensued. The loudspeaker remained silent. Goldstein raised up from his improvised bed on the deck. He seemed not to know where he was because he gazed about him in wonderment.

"Finney!" bellowed Everson again, while his throat threatened to close up on him. "Finney! Wolkov!"

He knew instinctively that there would be no answer. Neither Finney nor Wolkov would be heard from. Somewhere in the ship their bodies were lying paralysed, staring stiffly with wide-opened eyes at nothing. As Everson envisioned this he felt the grip of horror on the back of his neck. The invisible enemy had cleverly contrived to lure them from the group and he himself had been the cat's-paw.

"I'm going to look for them!" exclaimed Sternal loudly. The navigator started to leave the bridge.

"Halt!" shouted the colonel. "Stay where you are!"

Sternal ignored the command and continued on his way. Determinedly. Everson drew his paralysing gun and fired. Sternal collapsed on the companionway steps.

"Weiss, bring him back up here!" ordered Everson. "He'll come to in a few moments. I'll repeat this once more: nobody leaves the Control Central, no matter what happens."

He felt weary and despondent. The few men who remained active were not enough now to carry out the final transition.

The insidious enemy had them in his grasp.

Goldstein traced the path of his pseudo-body without effort, yet it was still difficult for him to guide this grotesque, unheard of creation in the desired direction. Of course with each passing hour he had been able to comprehend the atomic structures of uncomplicated objects with an increasing facility but he had to be careful not to attract the slightest suspicion to himself. This marvellous faculty he had discovered in himself while on Eppan had to be built up and developed with careful circumspection. His idea of pretending to be out of his head had worked out splendidly. Nobody paid any attention to him.

Goldstein chuckled triumphantly. While he navigated the monstrous material formation along with his paranormal powers, his eyes observed the desperate spacemen around him. They were close to the breaking point.

Goldstein considered whether or not he should give them a little spectacle. A slight regrouping of molecular structure would be sufficient to make the pilot's seat look like a riding saddle. But maybe he'd save such items for later in his plan to force the men to his will; because it was still too soon for him to return to the Earth. He knew that his new talent was not to be compared to anything else in the Mutant Corps but the Corps as an overall entity still represented a force factor that he couldn't safely handle.

Not yet! As though it were child's play, Goldstein parted the molecules of a light metal wall apart and drove the pseudo-body through the opening thus created.

He was a brand-new link in the mutant chain—a psychokinetic who was capable of molecular rearrangement. This was more than mere telekinesis which had only permitted him *to move* matter. He could *alter* matter! With the power of his mind he was able to make it take on a desired form and then keep it under his control. He was still not practiced enough to handle more complicated material forms. It had to suffice with the men to shut off certain nerve channels in order to paralyse their bodies. Since he would need them all later for putting the guppy to his own uses, his method of dominating them was immaterial at the moment.

With such a mighty mental weapon as this he would never again subordinate himself to any man. Rhodan and his mutants had no right to tell him what to do. If he gave his new faculty time to develop completely there would be nothing that could threaten him. This little spaceship was a wonderful testing ground for his experiment.

He looked on apathetically while Weiss placed Sternal's body near him on the deck. The colonel shoved his paralysing weapon back into his uniform pocket. Goldstein might have easily taken them all by surprise but he had to condition them for it systematically—specially Everson. He had to demonstrate his powers to them, had to prove that any resistance was useless. If he should suddenly try to bring them under his will all at once they would remain rebellious and always ready to cause him trouble.

He allowed the pseudo-body to disintegrate into micro-particles of molecular dust. For the moment he didn't need it any more. Finney and Wolkov were lying helplessly by one of the engine modules. Painstakingly, the mutant had selected the most spirited or mettlesome of the crewmen and put them out of action.

Scornfully he looked over his selection: there was the Commander, overstuffed with his ideals and sense of responsibility; Walt Scoobey, the First Officer who had lately lost his sense of humour.

Leisurely, Goldstein then rested his eyes on the man who was next in line. This was Fashong, whose asiatic calm would be the most difficult to break through. Then came Poul Weiss, the man with the

unbridled temperament. Werner Sternal would be the next victim and then Inoshiro the Japanese, whose thoughts were playing around too close to the truth—even if he didn't realize it.

There remained the doctor, who was preparing a hypo for Mataal. These men comprised the elite of the crew and their resistance would be hard to overcome.

Goldstein's goal was to take possession of the *Fauna*. He hadn't yet worked out any definite plans beyond that point. Everything would depend on how his skill continued to develop. So far there had been no cessation of the growth of his strange new powers. He had to probe and test ahead slowly because a single mistake could mean his undoing. So he would have to keep on playing the role of the debilitated mental basket case. Under no circumstances could he take the chance of over-estimating his powers. It was important for him to control his progress and take things easy at first. After he had improved his techniques and capacities to some extent, he could assign his brain to more complicated tasks. He had time. Everson could not carry out another hypertransition and the provisions on board left him enough leeway for careful handling of the situation.

The young mutant was contented with the successes he had achieved thus far. Thanks to his new faculty he had been able to outsmart an experienced group of astronauts without much effort. What was possible with this small number of men should also apply to a city, perhaps a large city. Goldstein pushed these thoughts from his mind. The time was not yet ripe for such larger considerations. It would be preposterous for him to rush headlong into larger undertakings. He was young, intelligent and possessed a gift that no others had had before him. He could unfold tremendous powers and besides he also had the faculty of telepathy. He was able to penetrate the thoughts of his companions and discover what kind of plans and ideas were milling about inside their heads.

For example, Everson was in the process of pondering whether or not he might yet accomplish the final transition jump. Goldstein did not follow the Commander's thoughts farther since he saw that Everson would not arrive at any effective decision. Dr. Morton was preoccupied with his newly incapacitated patient. On the other hand, Fashong was brooding over the possibility that Everson himself might be at the bottom of their troubles. The most dangerous thought-train was going on in the mind of the Japanese. Inoshiro had some definite ideas about how the paralysis phenomenon could be produced. If a paralytic state were not brought about by exterior, physical means, the Japanese was asking himself, then what other possibilities remained open? Goldstein was determined to keep Inoshiro under constant observation. Scoobey was trying to figure to himself how long the guppy could wander around out here in the void before everybody died of hunger. The mental processes of Weiss were also quite interesting. He was trying to picture what he would do when the guilty one was discovered. Sternal was the most frightened of them all and he kept hoping that Everson would do something that would save them.

Goldstein heard Everson's voice ring out: "Now pull yourself together!" The ship's leader was talking to Sternal, who had fully recovered from the effects of the paralysis gun.

"But we can't just let those two lie there!" protested Sternal. "It's possible that the radiation down there in those power modules is so intensive..." His voice faded to an inaudible whisper.

Everson replied in a somewhat softer tone. "I'm thinking that maybe they didn't even get that far."

I'll give them a jolt, thought Goldstein. Their nerves have to be held at the breaking point.

He looked for a suitable object. He finally chose the cover that was lying on Stanford. He ascertained that nobody was watching the patient. His brain registered the molecular structure of the light blanket. He etched into his mental vision a blueprint of the carbon molecules which were the main ingredient of the

woollen coverlet He could have regrouped the structure and created a yard-long piece of rope, after which he could break it into a thousand fragments, but this was not his intention. Under pressure of his will, the coverlet rose up easily from Stanford's body. Goldstein scanned the men sharply again and then he put the molecules in motion. A flying carpet seemed to glide away from Stanford. The mutant worked swiftly and deftly. He manoeuvred the cover so that it came down over Zimmerman. The paralysed communications man was now doubly blanketed whereas Stanford lay there only in his uniform.

Scoobey was the first one to notice it. "Doc, did you uncover Stanford?" he asked Morton.

The physician, who was standing next to Everson, looked across at the patient. "No, of course not." He raised his voice. "Who took Stanford's blanket away?"

Nobody answered. Perplexed, the medico came closer to the paralysed men.

"Somebody seems to be taking special care of Zimmerman," he remarked, somewhat nonplussed. He covered Stanford carefully again.

Goldstein realized that he couldn't shake them up this way. They were far too uptight now to give much heed to such minor items. Everybody seemed to think it had been an oversight.

Except for one of them—Inoshiro!

Tensely, Goldstein followed the thoughts of the Japanese. Inoshiro had observed the patients a few minutes before Goldstein's action. He was sure of his facts: up to that time, Stanford had not been lying there without a cover on him. In the meantime, nobody had been near the patient. It was impossible that one of the paralysis victims should have been able to make the change in the covering arrangement, much less even considered such a thing. Only Goldstein was not paralysed among the patients here on the deck. Could the crazy mutant have perpetrated such a piece of nonsense?

He would have had to stand up, pondered Inoshiro, unaware that he had a 'listener' Even if he stretched his arm way out he couldn't reach over to Stanford. A person could almost believe that the cover had been moved by an invisible force, and... The mutant!

The thought burst was so strong that Goldstein was shaken by it. He collected himself swiftly and strained to make out what else was going on in the other's now—swirling thought patterns. There were separate fragments: *...with mental force... why shouldn't he also be able to handle telekinesis? ...would explain a lot... but if I think of it he'll notice it... have to tell Everson at once...*

Goldstein could hesitate no longer. The Japanese had his suspicions aroused and was about to inform Everson about them. The mutant did not have time to paralyse Inoshiro. That would have required a careful probing into the corresponding nerve centres.

Goldstein's gaze fastened upon a writing stand that was on the Navigation desk and he concentrated on a penzel. For the mutant the plastic device was nothing more than a collection of uncomplex molecules which he could easily manipulate. In a flash he regrouped the molecular structure and compacted it into a cubical missile.

Inoshiro was looking over at him. His excitement was obvious. Goldstein proceeded in an icy calm. Before the lips of the Japanese could utter a cry of alarm, the mutant accelerated the totally reformed pen and brought it against Inoshiro's forehead with the force of a hammer blow.

With a groan, the diminutive Asiatic sank unconscious to the deck. The other men hurried over to him. Goldstein was careful to make his improvised weapon glide away to one side. While the spacemen concerned themselves with the wounded victim and lifted him up to have a look at him, the mutant returned the missile to its original form and sent it back to the desk again.

"Doc," he heard Everson saying, "you'd better have a look at his forehead."

Dr. Morton and Everson were bent over looking at Inoshiro in flabbergasted amazement. The physician turned the Asiatic's face up to the light.

"He's only unconscious," he said. "It looks like somebody's hit him with a crowbar or something."

In complete bewilderment, Everson looked at the ship's doctor. "But that's impossible," he said. "Nobody was having any words with him. There must be another explanation."

"Maybe he bumped against something," suggested Weiss.

Goldstein didn't pay any more attention to them. The Japanese would not remain unconscious for long. But there was a way of prolonging his present state. Goldstein sank back on his makeshift bed. Now he had time to put the Asiatic out of action like the other paralysed men who lay beside him. He was breathing under a new tension of excitement. Who was there to stop him? He'd sweep them all out of his way—Everson, Rhodan, the other mutants—anybody who stood in his path. Then he, Goldstein, would stand up against the weaker ones and the course of human development would take the direction that he had in his mind.

Goldstein had very definite ideas about his future. Of course there was a certain sense of uneasiness that slumbered deep within him, which somehow he could not explain.

8/ PHANTOM ENEMY

Somewhere in his youth, Everson had seen an educational film in which the members of a primitive race of people irrigated their land by using a thin and shaggy donkey to operate a pump while being driven endlessly in a circle with its eyes blindfolded. While the defenceless animal clopped its weary path through the noonday heat, mercilessly plagued by insects, the natives lounged in the shade beside a brook.

Even at that early age, Everson had sensed a resentment in himself against this treatment of the animal. Now as he sat slouched wearily in his pilot's chair, his face grey and sunken from lack of sleep, he had a much deeper insight into the torments of the donkey. His own situation had much in common with the quadruped he had seen in the film. He, too, moved in circles; his eyes seemed to be blindfolded, preventing him from seeing the truth.

His hands slowly turned the glass of ice-cold refreshment which Dr. Morton had given him to lift his spirits.

Inoshiro had not regained consciousness. He had gone into the same mysterious state of paralysis as the

other patients. The episode had finally gotten to Sternal. Just a few minutes ago he had broken down in front of everyone left in the Control Central, sinking silently to the deck like a marionette without the support of its strings.

But weren't they all lust puppets here in the power of the invisible enemy who manoeuvred them as he pleased? Everson looked at the 4 men who still remained to him. One of them had to be a criminal.

Perhaps Dr. Morton? The physician was an expert who could easily have caused such a condition of paralysis in the men. But Everson was in the dark as to 'how' he might have done it. Or was Fashong the guilty one? This alert and keen-minded Chinese who always wore the same expression of Oriental inscrutability—what reason would he have had to do a thing like this? Poul Weiss? Everson shook his head. He could not believe that he could have had anything to do with the situation. No more than Scoobey who sat there in his chair with half-closed eyes, dreaming into nothingness.

As for Mataal, he was under the influence of Dr. Morton's injection. It would be purposeless to give him another shot because the Eppanian was completely blameless. All other crew members were paralysed—except Goldstein! But the poor kid was out of his head.

So the probability of putting a finger on the guilty one did not have very good odds. Or was something else on board? Everson recalled Goldstein's delirious ravings. Wasn't the mutant just fantasizing when he claimed that he had 'sneaked' Death itself on board the ship? Were such statements merely the dark forebodings of a paranormally sensitive person or was there actually some unknown alien enemy here?

Everson got up from his seat, aware of being watched by distrustful eyes. He must appear to be under as much suspicion for the others as they were to him.

The colonel slowly approached Goldstein. The telepath's eyes were closed but his breathing was rapid as though he were under some kind of tension.

Everson bent down over him. "Goldstein!" he called softly. "Can you hear me?"

The mutant's eyes snapped open suddenly and they stared up at Everson, shining with a fevered intensity.

"Calm yourself, boy," said Everson. "I just want to talk to you."

Goldstein rose up with a start and looked around at the paralysed men. He turned over and supported himself on his elbows. "There they lie," he said, shuddering. He gesticulated with a nervously tense index finger. "We'll all be lying there like that—all of us!"

"Why don't you tell me more about it?" Everson urged him.

Goldstein suddenly took hold of him in fear. The Commander shook him gently to clear his mind and reassure him. "We're being watched!" said the telepath in a whining tone of voice. His eyes wandered about. "He will kill me if I say anything."

"Nobody is going to kill you! Who are you talking about? Tell me who is watching us—just talk—speak up, Goldstein!" These last words he had almost shouted.

Goldstein grinned foolishly. For a moment Everson had the strange feeling that he was missing something very important and decisive. He couldn't centralize his thoughts; they seemed to flee as though someone

had wiped them Out with an eraser.

"It's Dr. Morton." Goldstein's voice was like that of a child who was enlarging upon something overheard from grownups. "Dr. Morton is going to kill me," he shrieked discordantly.

Everson turned from the mutant. Dr. Morton blanched suddenly and got up from his seat, his blue eyes searching Everson gravely. The colonel drew his paralysis weapon.

"You're crazy!" yelled the physician. "Goldstein is not in his right mind—are you going to believe him?"

"He's a telepath," said Everson. "Maybe he's flipped but he can still read thoughts—and he suspects you, Doc.

You're the only man on board who could do this to us because you have the knowledge to be able to create such a condition in these men. And besides, *you* haven't been paralysed yet."

The bearded medico took a few steps backwards. His arm raised up as he pointed accusingly at Everson. "Now I see through it all!" he shouted. "*You* are the culprit! Oh this is real clever, alright. If you eliminate me there will be no one else to stand in your way." He appealed to Scoobey and Weiss. "He's behind it all, believe me!"

Determinedly, Everson raised his gun.

"Stop him!" roared the doctor, super-indignant. "Stop him before it's too late. Don't you see what a fiendish game he's playing with us?"

Later, Everson was unable to explain what induced him to shoot. Morton staggered and fell to the deck.

"He's only paralysed," said Everson tonelessly. "Get him out of the way."

"He did not appear to have a guilty conscience, sir," observed Fashong quietly.

"Not as guilty as I should be feeling, is that what you mean?" inquired Everson.

"It's completely senseless for us to keep on suspecting each other," replied the Chinese calmly. "We should face the fact that we've been beaten and if we try to make contact with our antagonist with that in mind, he may well reveal himself."

"Only an insane person can be our opponent," said Everson. "He blocked out the final transition jump and in so doing he sentenced himself to death along with the rest of us."

Since Mataal had finally recovered from the effects of the injection, Everson helped him to his feet. The Eppanian looked around at the increased number of victims. "Your situation apparently hasn't gotten any better," he said, not without sarcasm. "Am I still the number one suspect?"

Everson shook his head negatively.

"I still think my suggestion is valid," continued Fashong stubbornly. "We should make contact with our phantom enemy because we don't have any choice in the matter. So let's surrender."

Everson snapped at him: "I'm the one who will decide the time and place for surrender, if it comes to

that. But our 'friend' is only going to show himself when *he* decides to do so.

Scoobey who had remained silent for a long time now came up from his chair. He spoke like a man who had thoroughly examined a problem and arrived at the best possible solution. "I have another plan, sir," he said. "We destroy the ship." He waited to see if anybody had any comment. As no one spoke, he continued: "We will cause the *Fauna* to self-destruct in empty space. Commander Everson will be able to confirm that this is possible. Of course this would mean that all of us will die with the guppy—but it would also include the enemy. This is the only way we can flush him out. He would *have* to do something if he didn't want to be destroyed along with the rest of us. His carefully followed strategy would have to be abandoned. Above all, he would have to give up the idea of knocking us out, one by one, because my plan won't give him that much time. So that way we'll force our unknown enemy to lay his cards on the table."

"I'm with you!" cried Weiss with a surge of emotion. Fashong was cautious. "That sounds a bit final. Your suggestion leaves us no alternative but to die, or—well, that 'or' part has me stumped, I'll admit."

"In any case I'm against destroying the ship," said Everson. "We still have a chance to help ourselves by other means."

In two steps, Scoobey was beside Mataal. He raised the other's arm on high. "Doesn't he also have a right to decide what's to happen to us? His life is threatened as much as ours. So give him the opportunity to express his own view. That's the least we can do."

"Alright," said Everson, "I'll ask him." Whereupon he described the issue to the Eppanian in his own language.

"Destroy the ship!" demanded Mataal. "You can't ever force an enemy by standing still and doing nothing." His teeth flashed as his yellow face hardened with grim decision. Everson was certain that Mataal looked upon their unknown foe as some sort of monster that could be conquered in the arena with a sword.

He turned to his First Officer. "You win," he said. "Mataal is on your side. Nevertheless, we'll ask Dr. Morton. He'll be coming to, sooner or later."

Scoobey walked over to the physician and pushed him with his toe. The older man appeared to be fully paralysed like the rest. "You're not going to have much luck there, sir," he said tonelessly. "Here's another proof that we can't wait any longer. Do you want to wait until we're all lying here stiff as boards?"

Everson felt a rising urge to fight something with his bare fists. "Morton's condition throws suspicion on me, he admitted. "So on that basis I'll buy your proposition!"

Scoobey smiled. "Very well," he said, satisfied. "You know what has to be done, sir. We can't do it from up here. We have to go down to the propulsion section. I suggest that we lock up the Control Central and leave here at once."

Four above-average intelligent Terranians and one Eppanian all looked at each other. A tacit mutual agreement was in their eyes. Scoobey led the way.

They did not get very far. They were confronted with an unbelievable spectacle: the companionway stairs—the only route into the rest of the ship—disappeared before them. They became somehow

attenuated, then transparent, then just an outline, before they vanished completely.

"It looks like we've rubbed the enemy the wrong way," observed Weiss in a dry tone of voice as he looked down over the railing.

For the moment they had no other way of leaving the control bridge. It had become their prison, as though they had already been delivered into the hands of their merciless opponent.

A ghastly outburst of laughter tore them from their thoughts. In startled amazement, they turned to see that it was Goldstein who was laughing so deliriously.

"Somebody better give him a shot," suggested Scoobey.

"He'll calm down again," said Everson. "I'm sure it's just a temporary attack."

What was left for them, he pondered wearily—what other avenue could they take? He felt completely depleted. Hollowed out and without any inner substance remaining to him, he stood there facing the enemy, whoever he might be. The others hadn't fared any better—except for the Eppanian. Since all that had happened was beyond his comprehension, he remained unaffected.

Everson stared at the place where the aluminium steps of the companionway ladder had been but moments before. Tensely he wondered at it. How or by what means could anyone explain such a disappearance?

Was there any chance left for them at all?

* * * *

Goldstein slowly recovered from his extreme state of exhaustion. The effort it had cost him to disintegrate the stairway in a short length of time had drained him almost to the limit. But he could not let this opportunity for a demonstration of his power slip by without using it to his advantage. That was all that mattered. He had to convince Everson that he was invincible. The morale of this small group had to be shattered, piece by piece. Goldstein was now convinced that he would succeed.

He heard Poul Weiss offering a suggestion. "If we tied all these blankets together we could let ourselves down to the catwalk."

"No use," countered Everson. "If we make any kind of a ladder at all it will suffer the same fate as the stairs."

Fashong spoke up: "I'd like to remind you of my suggestion, sir."

Once we know who the culprit is, it'll be easier for us to take him by surprise, thought the astronaut. Why doesn't Everson go along with that?

Goldstein followed these thoughts effortlessly. He would knock out the Chinese as the next man on his list. The Asiatic's iron self-control and his ability to come up with shrewd considerations even in a

situation like this could be a big help to Everson, which Goldstein did not like at all.

"What do you think I'm going to do, Fashong?" asked Everson. "Just announce over the ship com that I'm ready to negotiate? It doesn't seem to me that our adversary had to talk to us at all."

"What I have to say now may sound a bit presumptuous," replied Fashong. "But I've noticed a certain pattern in the enemy's *modus operandi*. He started by knocking out the men he seemed to consider the least important and then he slowly worked up into the more strategic type of personnel. We four—excluding Mataal, naturally—constitute the top command echelon of the guppy. Certainly that can't be just a coincidence."

No doubt about it, reflected Goldstein—the Chinese was on the verge of discovering the truth. He had stuck to the trail like a bloodhound. Goldstein almost felt a certain sympathy for Fashong, who was struggling valiantly to find a solution without the help of paranormal faculties.

"So?" said the colonel. "Where do you go from there?" Fashong continued: "Ordinarily you'd think that the logical sequence would be to take care of the top command first so that he could eliminate any resistance from that quarter. But if he doesn't take that route it means he has special plans for those who are left or he wants to put pressure on them. He wants to make them surrender. So why don't we do what this mystery phantom wants us to do, sir?"

Everson's voice rose slightly as he answered: "No matter what happens, I will never surrender."

The navigator went to his work desk. He scribbled several sentences on a piece of paper and handed it to the Commander.

Goldstein could easily follow the thought in Everson's mind as he read: *We could only appear to surrender. Then we play for keeps.*

Everson crumpled the note. His tall figure leaned over the microphone. "We are ready to negotiate," he said slowly. "Whoever the enemy may be, he can reveal himself now so that we may come to terms."

Goldstein tittered scornfully. His paranormal powers came into action. The Penzel on the navigation desk moved as though held in a ghostly hand. Carefully, Goldstein guided the note he had written through the Control Central. It floated slowly toward Everson.

"Sir!" yelled Weiss. "Look at that!"

Everson snatched the piece of paper out of the air. Aloud, he read the single sentence that was written there. "Go to the devil!"

Fashong appeared to be satisfied. "I would say that is a typically human expression.

Goldstein knew that he didn't have much time. He dared not hesitate as long as he had in Inoshiro's case. Carefully he probed the brain of the Chinese. A slight modification of certain nerve channels would suffice.

"Oh, great!" growled Everson sarcastically. "*That's* a big help!"

Fashong spoke rapidly: "There is only one conclusion we can draw from the facts at hand."

Goldstein knew the next words before Fashong could express them—but no one else would get to hear them. The slightly built Oriental spaceman suddenly trembled as though gripped by the ague.

In one leap, Everson was there to support him. "Talk!" he yelled. "Fashong, spit it out!"

Fashong opened his mouth but no sound passed his lips. His hand fluttered in the air like a withered leaf as though he wanted to point in a certain direction. But it turned rigid in midcourse and fell back heavily. Everson felt the small form in his arms go limp.

"He knew!" exclaimed the colonel. "He knew who our enemy is but he couldn't tell us any more. He's paralysed like the others."

"But one thing he did tell us," said Scoobey. "He mentioned that this 'go to the devil' phrase was a typically human expression. That means that one of the three of us is the criminal here." He stared at Weiss and Everson as though wanting to remember the expression on their faces. "No—it has to be one of either of you because *I know* I'm not the one.

Everson slowly pulled back into a corner. The paralysing gun appeared in his hand. "Scoobey or Weiss," he said. "The choice is narrowing down."

Weiss roared with laughter. "Terrific!" he shouted. "It may sound idiotic but I presume that one of you two is the culprit."

Now they would be tangling with one another, thought Goldstein contentedly. So let them drive each other insane. What would happen if they eliminated the next victim—in other words, Scoobey? Everson and Weiss would accuse each other. The colonel was armed. Which meant that he didn't have to worry about preserving Everson. The big spaceman would be the last survivor. Mataal, who sat calmly on the deck, did not count. A quick look into the Eppanian's thoughts revealed nothing but homesickness to Goldstein.

Without intending to, Fashong had led the three men down the wrong track. Each one of them was convinced that only one of the other two could be the guilty one. Everson was mostly suspicious of Weiss; Scoobey believed that Everson was the villain; and Weiss was figuring that Scoobey above all was the one he'd have to defend himself against.

Amused, Goldstein observed the three weary figures who stood there glaring at each other suspiciously. Everson released the safety catch on his weapon, making it ready to fire, while Scoobey made sure his back was clear. Weiss crouched on the deck and thought that he wouldn't have much chance to defend himself.

"I think we're acting pretty darn childish," said Weiss. "The Commander believes he will be able to protect himself with that weapon." He smiled disdainfully. "You know very well, sir, that that isn't possible if the same thing happens to you that happened to Fashong—whom are you going to shoot then?"

Everson did not answer him. Scoobey activated the support arm of his pilot seat and glided upward. Now he was at least 6 feet off the deck.

Weiss looked up at him. "Do you feel safer up there?" he asked of the First Officer.

"It clears my position," he said enigmatically.

They were all in the trap! Goldstein made no effort to suppress his rising sense of triumph. He, a young and inexperienced mutant, was leading these seasoned veterans around by their noses. His magnificent new talent made them play into his hands like so many marbles that he could roll in any desired direction. Goldstein had no further doubt that they would obey him. It was just necessary to wear Everson down to such a point that he would carry out orders without making any trouble. All the others would follow the course of their superior officer. If against all expectations Everson were to still remain unreasonable, in spite of this veritable soul massage he was getting, then he would have to die. With Everson gone, the guppy would lose its moral and spiritual leader, but Scoobey was no poor substitute. Then after Goldstein had released the other spacers from their paralysis, they would think back in horror and avoid taking any risk which could bring the same fate upon them again.

It was a lucky chance that had played the K-262 into his hands as a wonderful opportunity for testing his paranormal powers and developing them even further. Once he abandoned the guppy, however, he would have to be able to overcome all opposition. Rhodan would not be so easily shaken. Goldstein was well aware of this man's power but he had faith in his own faculties which when once fully unleashed would make him invincible. Goldstein smiled contemptuously. Was it not absurd that a man with no particular parapsychic abilities should rise to be the leader of the Solar Empire? Goldstein was certain that the Mutant Corps was only waiting for a mighty one out of their own ranks to pull Rhodan off his roost. He, Goldstein, would be that man.

Pensively he observed the long row of the victims. There they lay, rigid and silent. Only their thoughts were not paralysed. Their minds virtually seethed in fear, hatred and horror over Goldstein's plans. Now that they were bound in motionlessness on the deck, they were aware of the enemy. But the lips that wanted to scream out their knowledge remained mute. Their tongues and throats failed them.

Goldstein probed more deeply. Yes, there was the formative intent already, to subordinate themselves to the mutant—an intent that had crept secretly into their subconscious minds. The inclination was there, needing only to be awakened and intensified. They would bow to him, full of hate and anger. But they would obey.

The telepath trembled with the sense of his own might. There was for him an effect of intoxication or rapture in these thoughts. He felt contempt for these blind humans who laboriously communicated with mere words and who experienced their environment without really comprehending it. *His* vision went further. *They* were primitive—a special breed of animals. A simple piece of wood was meaningless to *them* because *they* were only aware of size, form and colour. On the other hand *he* was able to marvel at the fine graining of the wood as well as the structure and grouping of its molecules. With his new extrasensory ability he could even touch and palpate the exquisite crystalline formations of the smallest particles—he was cognizant of their characteristics, he could alter them, even destroy them and build new ones.

Therefore, *he* was more than *they*. From a mental and psychic standpoint, he towered above them—as far as they towered above the apes.

"Sir!" Weiss' loud voice startled Goldstein from his thoughts. "You're dozing off, sir!"

Everson had leaned back but now he suddenly pushed himself away from the wall. He could only keep his eyes open with an effort. He rubbed his face with his hand as though he might thus wipe away his fatigue.

Just don't fall asleep, Goldstein read in Everson's mind. Just for now, of all times, don't fade out!

Scoobey glowered down at them over the armrest of his chair. "Aren't *you* tired, Poul?" he asked. "Seems to me you're practically fresh as a daisy."

"So you're telling me that makes me equally suspicious, right?" inquired Weiss sarcastically. "Just because I've got less flab on me I suppose now I have to give an explanation for my excellent condition." Weiss yawned emphatically. "If I weren't scared out of my boots, I'd sleep," he said.

Just stay awake, old boy, thought the colonel imploringly. It was only with a great effort of will that he held himself away from the tempting support of the wall at his back.

Goldstein watched them—the *apes!* The Commander who was starting to sway in his fatigue... Scoobey, hanging up there in his chair all washed out... and Weiss, so angry and fearful at the same time that he managed to develop a grim sort of humour. Mataal was thinking intently of his home planet, from which he was separated by inconceivable distances. These thoughts were somehow bothersome to Goldstein. They seemed to intensify an inexplicable feeling deep down inside of him, and he did not pursue them any farther.

Scoobey spoke again. "We have to work out a way for us to stand watch."

"Why?" asked Weiss. "Better yet, show me a way where I can go peacefully to sleep and I'll show you what I'll do." He looked up at Scoobey almost hopefully.

"Do you have a suggestion, Walt?" asked Everson hoarsely.

"We have to converse," said Scoobey. "We have to talk to each other to fight off fatigue and keep awake."

"Count me out," objected Weiss.

Goldstein snorted derisively. The apes were growling and grunting at each other in their monkey language in an attempt to communicate. Weiss lay back on the deck and closed his eyes, definitely determined to go to sleep.

"Alright, go ahead, Walt," said Everson. "Talk away!" Goldstein did not require much time now for what he had to do. By this time he was more practiced and knew just where to apply his probing forces. Scoobey collapsed loosely over the armrest of his chair.

"Go ahead, Walt," Everson repeated. He looked up and saw Scoobey's upper torso dangling over the armrest. "Walt!" he called out. "Have you gone to sleep already?"

He went to the switchboard and caused the seat boom to glide downward. Scoobey's body swayed slightly. Everson went to him, his face suddenly turned to stone. Goldstein involuntarily withdrew from the sudden storm of the colonel's thoughts.

"Weiss!" yelled Everson, so tensely that his voice cracked.

Weiss opened his eyes and saw Everson leaning over Scoobey's chair. He looked slowly from Everson to Scoobey. "So you were the one," he said almost in a tone of relief. "If that's the case, what was your purpose in sparing me this long?"

The paralysing gun appeared in Everson's hand. A speechless ferocity came over the colonel. Pent-up rage blazed in his eyes. Weiss grinned in weak resignation and the smile remained on his face under the paralysing effect of the weapon as Everson fired it at him, causing his body to fall back on the deck again. As the technician tumbled into an abyss of unconsciousness, Everson's form swam before him like a giant, shapeless shadow.

Everson spoke softly in the Eppanian tongue. "It's over with."

Mataal did not answer him.

The colonel let Scoobey rise upward again in his seat. "That's where he wanted to be," he said to Mataal. There was that in his voice that indicated he had found the answer. "Now, my friend, you see that you and I are the only ones left on board who can move. That is," he concluded meaningfully, "we—and *Goldstein* ..."

9/ THE ULTIMATUM

Goldstein swept the blanket away and sprang up. "So now you know," he said. It was a statement of confirmation.

"Yes," replied the colonel, "I had to find out sooner or later."

Goldstein shrugged indifferently. His new arrogance fairly radiated from him. "Stop playing around with that popgun," he commanded. "You won't be able to fire it anyway. And don't try coming at me with the muscle bit, either—I can read that crazy idea in your thoughts. Before you reached me you'd be keeping company with your buddies who are lying around here at my feet."

"What do you want from me?" asked Everson.

With a gesture of mock politeness the mutant indicated the chief pilot's seat. "Won't you be seated, sir?" He moved out from between the bodies of the paralysed men and waited until Everson had complied. "What I want is the *Fauna*," he said, then watched Everson warily.

Now that Everson knew who his adversary was, all fear had vanished from him. "There's a convenient little phrase," he said, "that you came up with, yourself. So I'll give it back to you: *go to the devil!*"

Goldstein laughed. "A typical reaction: stupid and illogical, my dear Colonel. I will call up a few facts in your memory which may change your rather uncircumspect attitude."

"You think so? I'll not change my opinion—now or later," Everson assured him. "You can talk as much as you want to."

"Careful, Colonel!" Goldstein's voice was still mocking and derisive. "There on the deck are 11 paralysed men. Two more are lying in front of engine mod 3. Of course you just saved me the trouble with Weiss. Certainly you should be interested in having your crewmen become able-bodied again. You know that I have only two alternatives, Everson: either I succeed in taking possession of the guppy or I

must die. In the latter case, you know I'll not be without company." He pondered a moment. "Do you see that penzel on the nav table?" he said then.

As Everson looked in the indicated direction, the mutant caused the writing instrument to float slowly toward them.

"I see," said Everson, "that you've added psychokinesis to your telepathic ability. But you've already demonstrated it to us enough."

Goldstein made a gesture commanding him to silence. The penzel began to change its form. It became long and sharp—like a large needle. Against his will, Everson was fascinated by the phenomenon. Suddenly the newly created instrument shot like an arrow through the air. It struck the deck close to Landi and remained there quivering.

Goldstein went over and pulled it free. He weighed it in his hand deliberately. "You're an intelligent man, Everson. What it's possible for me to do with a thing like this I can also do with larger objects, including living beings. When I spoke to you about our all dying together if you didn't become reasonable, what I meant was that you were going to be a spectator of these deaths, where you would see one man die after another in a special way. So since you're not cooperating yet I'll start with Ramirez. Short and Stanford will be next. I'll save you for the last, Colonel."

"You'll never get away with it," said Everson. Small beads of sweat stood out on his chalk-white face. "You must be insane, Goldstein. Only a madman could think up something like that. You're a fiend!"

Goldstein made the long needle rotate on the back of his hand. Then he threw it from him. "Aren't you being melodramatic?" he asked. "Do you want to be responsible for the death of your comrades? All you have to do is obey my orders and everything will take care of itself. I'll release the men from their paralysis and they won't give you any trouble."

"If I go along with you, then what happens?" inquired Everson with a sense of dark foreboding.

"You don't have to beat your brains over that part. Your assignment will be to simply take this ship to where I can prepare myself for my further tasks."

Everson sought to dam up his swirling maelstrom of thoughts. He knew that they were no secret from the telepath. The mutant could read his mind like an open book. If an idea came to Everson, Goldstein would know it simultaneously and could react instantly. The vicious youngster was ruthless enough to follow up his threat and brutally slay the entire crew. In bitter self-condemnation the colonel thought of the mistakes he had made. If he had seen through Goldstein's strategy in the beginning there might have been a number of opportunities for a counterstroke of some kind.

"Weiss is coming to," announced Goldstein in a strident voice. "You'd better make sure he doesn't try anything he'll be sorry for."

Everson helped Weiss to his feet. In his confusion, Weiss shook his head and shoved Everson away from him.

"Don't trouble yourself," he said morosely. Then he saw Goldstein.

"Watch it Poul," warned Everson, "He has us cornered."

"Now I'm beginning to understand," declared Weiss. "This greenhorn has made fools of us. It looks like we ought to take him apart for that." Poul Weiss was undaunted enough to start putting his words into action.

"Stop!" shouted Everson. "Apparently you don't know what's going on, Poul. Goldstein wants us to hand the ship over to him and he has all kinds of plans for it. He will destroy us all if we don't work under his command."

Weiss cursed violently and hurled himself forward. He was only separated from Goldstein by about three yards. Everson caught a fleeting shadowy glimpse of the pilot's seat flying past him. Weiss was almost on top of the mutant when the seat struck him full in the chest. The sheer force of the blow sent him flying straight across the bridge. He lay on the deck, breathing laboriously. Goldstein's eyes seemed to be glowing.

"He's wounded," said Everson bitterly as he went over to Weiss and bent down to look at him.

"And so?" Goldstein's face froze into a mask of indifference. "He asked for it—you warned him."

"Don't you have any feelings at all?" shouted Everson in a rage.

"For *apes*?" Goldstein stood there and watched while the colonel lifted Weiss up and carefully set him down in a chair. Weiss was moaning faintly.

"Goldstein," said Everson forcefully, "you'd better come to your senses. Look—nobody's been killed yet. It's still not too late to turn back from what you're doing. The way you're going can only lead to destruction."

Wherever you think you're going to hide, Rhodan's revenge will find you. You can't fool with us like this and think you're going to go unpunished."

"Shut up!" snarled the mutant. "Who's talking about hiding? I don't have to hide from Rhodan. Can't I get that through your head, Everson? I am more powerful than Rhodan. Haven't I supplied you with enough proof of that? I'm not going to wait much longer. Ramirez will be the first to go—so think about it."

Everson compressed his lips. He felt Weiss groping for his hand. "Do you have pain?" Everson asked him,

"Listen to me!" whispered Weiss laboriously. "You can't give him the *Fauna*—no matter what happens. Goldstein must not reach the Earth."

"What do you want me to do? Stand by and watch him kill us all?" asked Everson despairingly.

Weiss clutched at his chest in pain. "He can't get anywhere without the ship," he groaned. "Don't you see? He has to have the guppy. Just keep him from getting it!"

Everson shook him gently. "Show me a solution, Poul. How can I avoid seeing 14 men go to their deaths in front of my eyes?"

"That's enough!" snapped Goldstein, cutting him off. He stood at his full height on the edge of the bridge. The fevered eyes dominating his haggard face took on a frightening aspect. His hair hung down wildly

over his forehead. "You've talked enough!" he continued. "You'd better consider now how you're going to decide." He glanced up at Scoobey. "Or do you need his moral support?"

"No," said Everson.

Scoobey would take the same position as Weiss and would put pressure on him to refuse giving the little spaceship to Goldstein. The two of them were unaware of the terrible consequences. Everson realized that only one answer remained to him: he had no right to endanger the lives of other men with his decision. Once Goldstein released them from their paralysis there might still be a chance to render the mutant harmless.

Everson was assailed by doubts. He had to keep in mind that Goldstein would be exceedingly cautious. Besides, it wasn't up to him to bring the mutant into line. The colonel was relying on Rhodan and his Mutant Corps. Even Goldstein couldn't stand up against a crack outfit like that. Everson knew for sure that he had seen a few samples of Goldstein's power—but not the full extent of it by any means.

"That's right, Colonel," remarked Goldstein, "you're not wrong about that!"

Everson ignored him and went on with his deliberations. Goldstein needed the crew in order to bring the guppy back to Earth. It would be a hopeless attempt on his part to land the ship without being detected.

"Who said I wanted to go back to Earth right away?" asked Goldstein.

"I infer that you are holding our home planet in reserve for later then," said the colonel. "I see—you still have to wait awhile, is that it, Goldstein? You haven't yet fully developed the special talent that you apparently discovered in yourself on Eppan. That's the way it is with all the mutants—they only ripen up after a long training and development period."

"Very sharp!" sneered the mutant. "My paranormal capacities are quite sufficient for taking over this ship. But you're right—my development is only in its beginning stages. What the final result will be I don't even know, myself."

Everson nodded. "That kind of bugs you, doesn't it?"

And I do mean *bug*—like an insect getting high on flower juice, you're off on Cloud 9 dreaming of your coming power. You're sick in the head, sonny. That tangled mess of your hair is a good picture of what your think-cage must be like—real spaced out."

"You can't get to me with that kind of talk," retorted Goldstein. "Would you let yourself be influenced by an orangutan?"

"Of course you know the old story about the scientist and the monkey," continued the Commander. "The scientist locked a chimpanzee in a room with a number of instruments and mechanical gadgets in order to find out what the animal would probably do. When the man bent down to peer through the keyhole, he stared right into the monkey's eye because the chimp was also interested in finding out what the scientist would probably do."

"Did that get the ape out of the room?" asked Goldstein scornfully.

He apparently waited for the colonel to give him an answer but the latter remained silent. His feelings for the mutant were a mixture of fear, hatred and contempt. For a man of Everson's inner qualities,

Goldstein's comportment was inconceivable. Goldstein's new perspectives seemed to lie in a realm beyond good and evil, in some special plane of existence which only the mutant himself could see. It wasn't possible to apply any normal standard of measurement to him because he wasn't normal. He was a new kind of human—a species that might well continue to appear in ever greater numbers.

In silent horror, Everson contemplated the probability of there being other power-crazed mutants like him around. This development phase among mutants was something that was going to have to be watched and controlled. Everson perceived the magnitude of the task that Rhodan had cut out for himself in this area and now he understood many things which before had merely elicited a shake of the head.

"The intensity of your deliberations is gratifying," announced Goldstein. "But I see that you're still digressing from our immediate problem. I expect you to answer my question."

"Give me a little more time," said Everson. "You know very well that I haven't formed any decision yet."

"Alright," returned Goldstein, "maybe I can help you to make up your mind a little faster."

Expecting to witness some new kind of devilment, Everson drew clear of Weiss.

"Look at your cadet there," directed Goldstein. Everson could see that Ramirez slowly recovered from his state of rigidity and then seemed to slump from exhaustion, after which he gradually straightened up. His eyes reflected a deep-rooted fear. In a half-raised position he stared at Goldstein. When the mutant moved, he followed him with his gaze like one hypnotized.

"You see I can release them from their paralysis any time I please," remarked Goldstein.

"What do you plan to do with the youngster?"

"You'd better make up your mind, once and for all." Goldstein's voice took on a shrill and menacing tone. "If you hesitate much longer, Ramirez is going to have to suffer for it."

Ramirez emitted a low cry. It was like the bleating lament of a lost animal, which shook the Commander far more than words.

"Leave Gonzalez alone," said Everson. "You can have the ship. I can't conceal my thoughts from you so you know that all I'm doing is waiting for a chance to destroy you."

Contrary to expectations, the mutant refrained from making a sarcastic retort. Instead he calmly walked over to the navigation desk. "You're slowly coming to your senses," he said. "Now we can go into the further details. Don't try any tricks, because you know I'll see them coming."

"State your demands," the colonel requested.

"Were you expected back on Earth at any specified time?" asked the mutant.

Before Everson could express himself he knew that Goldstein had probed for the answer and found it already.

"No, naturally not, but after a certain length of time Rhodan is bound to ask what's happened to us or where we are.

"Colonel, you've just about been an eye witness to the entire development of the New Power into the Solar Empire—from the start. At the expiration of that 'certain length of time', what do you think Rhodan will do in order to find out what's happened to you and the guppy?"

"There are a number of possibilities," replied Everson. "It will be assumed that we've run into trouble on Eppan and they'll send out a search ship in that direction."

"In other words that would mean that the *Fauna* would be least likely to be looked for where it will soon be: in the relative vicinity of the Earth," confirmed Goldstein.

"That could well be," admitted Everson reluctantly. "But it's impossible to land there without detection. The warning and search systems are so heavily interlocked and super-laminated that even a gnat couldn't fly around there without being spotted and tied into a precise set of target coordinates."

Goldstein sounded condescending. "I know all that. It will be your job then to find a refuge for this ship that is far enough away to be beyond Terra's traffic scanner range, and yet close enough so that they'd be unlikely to look for us there. Rhodan will do a routine search in the Eppan area, which gains considerable extra time for me." He grinned. "Remember, Everson—no tricks!"

For a brief moment Everson had considered landing the K-262 on Venus, where they were sure to be discovered, but Goldstein had perceived this plan and consequently had warned him with a superior smile.

In further elucidation of his plans, Goldstein continued. "Once we have found a suitable place I won't need your services for awhile. At a certain point in time you will then go to Rhodan and lay my demands before him. I will expect Rhodan's answer. How he may react to my stipulations is immaterial at the moment. Your most important task for the present is to select a suitable base for my operations."

"I hope you don't think that I can navigate the guppy solo through the void. For that I need the whole crew."

Goldstein nodded in agreement. "You shall have your crewmen. But first I have to put certain safety measures into effect so that I can defend myself against a mass attack. If they all try to gang up on me at once, the situation could get rough on both sides because then I wouldn't be so gentle in my methods of self-defence. Aside from the regular weapons distributed about the ship, you and Scoobey are the only ones carrying paralysis guns. You will both throw them over the railing. The companionway stairs won't be needed any more. Don't worry about Finney and Wolkov—I'll soon get them up here. I'm going to set myself up behind the transceiver equipment. Since the nav table is exactly across from the radio cabinets, *only one* person can come at me at any one time. That should be sufficient protection. Of course your men don't impress me as being particularly the warrior types but I have to cover every angle. Whoever attacks me will be paralysed again. You can tell that to your crew, Colonel. It'll cool them down a bit and make them more tractable. I am not going to take the slightest risk in this matter. Under no circumstances will I permit my plans to be shattered by any foolish error on my part. I am absolutely committed to reaching my objective."

"That I can believe," said Everson ironically. He threw his gun over the railing. "But what about Mataal?"

"He's unimportant. He'll probably die. He isn't able to adapt himself to this environment. His psyche is failing because of sadness and homesickness."

Everson turned to Mataal, who sat like a statue in a corner. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said, pityingly. "I

had not intended for him to have to go through all this." The dark slits of the Eppanian's eyes watched him in a mute expression of hopelessness. "Would you like to go back to your cabin?" Everson asked him. "Goldstein won't object to that and can manage somehow to bring you there."

Mataal shook his head silently.

"Quit worrying about that dumb savage," interjected Goldstein impatiently. "He's insignificant."

With an effort, Everson suppressed an instinctive string of invectives. There was just one alternative left: to sweat it out—until the mutant made just one slip-up!

"Naturally the telecom gear will continue to remain off the air," advised Goldstein. He was about to say something else but out of the corner of an eye he caught sight of Ramirez, who got up like a drunken sailor and tumbled into Everson's arms.

"No sir!" His voice was hardly more than a tremulous sigh. "I'm sorry I weakened for a moment. Don't give him the ship. If he kills us then he has to die, too, because without us he can't do a thing with the guppy. Maybe this is our last chance to stop this criminal."

Goldstein's provoking laughter rang discordantly through the Command Central. The mutant had not interrupted Ramirez, who supported himself against Everson. "The kid wants to make a martyr of himself, Everson. What do you say to that?"

Everson freed himself gently from the cadet. In the background he heard Weiss muttering curses incoherently to himself. Goldstein raised his hands, apparently enjoying the situation,

"Don't say it, Colonel," he said. "I know your answer and it's reasonable enough. You don't want any martyrs. There will be other such fools among the crew but fortunately you're not one of them."

Everson stared at him, eyes blazing with anger. Wordlessly he swallowed the insult because he thought he knew why Goldstein had expressed it that way. Basically, the mutant was easy to see through.

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt your psychological observations," said Goldstein. "But now we'll take care of the patients here." He shouted in sudden fanaticism: "I will destroy anyone who stands in my way!"

Yes, thought Everson bitterly, *there can be no doubt about that!*

10/ SLAVES OF THE MASTER

Their faces were tense with ill-concealed hate and they performed their work in resentful silence. Their hatred was concentrated on the man who stood there handing out orders between the nav desk and the transceiver cabinets. He was a thin, dishevelled-looking youngster whose ungainly movements seemed almost boyish. This was the one who could guess their thoughts even before they completed them.

Two yards above Goldstein floated a heavy block of metal, supported by invisible forces. The mutant

had threatened to smash anyone with it who dared to approach him without his permission. But the pseudo-body hanging there was more than just a security device for Goldstein—it was a symbol of conquest. Ever since the mutant had released the crewmen from their paralysis the thing had hovered over their heads. Also he had scornfully reminded them that he could paralyse them again at any moment. It was no longer necessary for him to probe them first to feel out their nerve locations because he knew them precisely now. His paranormal faculties now made it possible for him to penetrate their minds in a matter of seconds and completely incapacitate them.

In spite of this they had tried an attack on the sneering mutant only an hour before. Dealcour and Landi had seen a possible opening as they stood together near the switchboard. Even Everson had not been aware of their intention until they put it into action.

"Get him!" bellowed Dealcour suddenly.

Landi made a tiger-like leap toward Goldstein followed by Dealcour, who let out a savage war-whoop in an effort to sweep the other spacemen along with them. But before the latter could even grasp the idea of an attack, it was all over. Dealcour and Landi collapsed in front of the mutant.

"Take them away," said Goldstein coldly. "They'll regain consciousness soon. How could they believe that such an incredibly stupid method as that would work?" He waited until Dealcour and the radio man had been removed from in front of him. "There's already another plan to overcome me," he continued. "Scoobey, do you seriously think I'd just stand around and wait for you to short the main powerline to the bridge deckplates?"

The First Officer answered him belligerently: "I'll still pull it off—any time I think it will work."

"That's crazy, Walt," interjected Everson. "You'd only endanger us all needlessly. He'd be somewhere insulated before you even got started—so knock it off."

"Which doesn't keep the noble Commander himself from brooding over other ideas," observed Goldstein. "Also Doc Morton is silly enough to think he has a chance with his knockout powders."

That had been an hour ago. Since then nothing more had happened. They were in the process of preparing for the third transition. Goldstein had ordered a few changes. He appeared to want to avoid the immediate vicinity of the Earth under all circumstances. Everson knew that after the landing they would have very little chance to overpower Goldstein. If they were to surprise him at all it could only be here in the guppy where they were close together in a congested space. If they shouldn't be able to handle the little monster, Everson had decided not to carry out the landing. He was convinced that Goldstein was aware of this but so far the mutant hadn't given any indication of what he might do in such a case. Had he perchance discovered the possibility of guiding the *Fauna* without benefit of a crew? Under normal laws of logic, it was unthinkable, but nothing seemed to be impossible for Goldstein.

The next try came from Stanford, the biologist, whose only duty at the ship's controls was during a transition jump. He had managed to detach a heavy switch handle from his control board and the first thing Everson knew about it was when he saw the heftily thrown part whiz past him—toward Goldstein.

It almost looked as though the mutant had been taken by surprise and that he would be hit. But then Everson was forced to realize that Goldstein had only been playing with them in order to build up false hopes, which he now shattered mercilessly.

He ducked swiftly and the round metal shaft sailed over him, while slowing down in its flight across the

bridge. Everson saw that the thing's momentum was being manipulated by an unseen force. Stanford's projectile turned in a long curve and returned like a boomerang. The biologist watched its flight in whitefaced amazement. Then, as it picked up speed suddenly, Goldstein let out a wild laugh.

"Hit the deck, Stanford!" yelled Everson as he perceived what was intended.

The spaceman threw himself to the deck but the missile was almost upon him.

That thing will smash into him, thought Everson, horrified. But nothing of the kind occurred. The lever came to a stop over Stanford and then slowly sank until it pressed gently against the base of the biologist's anxiously covered skull.

"On your feet, Stanford!" Goldstein called out in a tone that was ironically patronizing. "That's right—now take the nice lever back to where it belongs."

All of their attempts to get at him had to be unavailing because at the outset Goldstein always saw them coming. The mutant kept up a constant mental surveillance on them.

"Stanford was extra clever that time," said Goldstein. "He figured he could keep his plan hidden from me by holding a second plan on the surface of his thoughts. He kept on thinking of how he might get the jump on me, in order to distract me from his real idea. I assure you that I can spot your most ingeniously contrived skullduggery no matter how you try to camouflage it."

Dejectedly, Stanford returned to his position. His inspiration about doubling up his thoughts hadn't been a bad one, considering, but he still couldn't conceal his motives from Goldstein. A successful attack would have to be one that required no premeditation—lightning swift, without brainwork ahead of time.

However, thought Everson resignedly, such a thing was impossible. The human brain was not so constituted that it could interrupt its train of thought at will. It was a special characteristic of the whole process that one had to think intensively of whatever he wished to bring from his mind into manifestation. The only way to overcome the mutant was to also overcome this particular problem. From whatever side the colonel regarded their situation he stared at a blank wall. In every direction he turned there seemed to be a difficulty of equal magnitude. In the end the mutant would be the unquestionable victor.

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The synthesized metal block above him swayed gently. Goldstein stabilized it and again turned his attention to the men. He had anticipated resistance but had been surprised at their unbelievable stubbornness and persistence in their attempts to get rid of him.

Goldstein knew that the ceaseless burden his paranormal powers were forced to withstand now was incomparably greater than it had been initially when he had been able to operate at his leisure. Of course he had become stronger now and could take on very unusual loads but he was not sure whether or not he could hold up at this rate over a long period of time. Still, there was no other way since he needed the spacemen to navigate the guppy.

He was aware of Everson's plan to sabotage the landing. Later he would get rid of the colonel and

replace him with Scoobey, who in spite of his rebelliousness was nevertheless easier to take by surprise. The mutant was well aware of the fact that Everson's complacency up to this point was based on a single hope: that he, Goldstein, would make a mistake.

Cautiously he checked a second synthesized pseudo-body which he kept hidden below the bridge so that at appropriate times he could experiment with it. Deep within him, Goldstein still had his strange feeling of uneasiness. It had remained with him ever since he had first become aware of his special powers. It was as though something were there that he didn't comprehend but which he was compelled to fathom sooner or later.

He suppressed his subliminal anxiety. He had to devote himself to the task before him. But in spite of this he was plagued by doubt. What were these plans, actually, that he had thought out? They had come to him simultaneously with the expansion of his abnormal faculties. At some time or another he would have to take time to get to the bottom of his discomfort.

11/ THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

A false rapture of lassitude and weariness lapped against his semi-conscious mind, threatening to wash it away. But he had slept enough. The memory of all that unutilized time of rest pained him now. He had since resigned himself to everything and had lost all hope when the unexpected rescue came. His thoughts drifted back farther.

Again came the vision of the mighty spaceship, ripped by the explosion. Again he was reeling along the corridor with the shriek of escaping air pounding in his ears. half-dazed by the sudden pressure drop.

Somewhere ahead was an emergency module... men and women running toward it. Blinded by pain and grief, he staggered toward the rescue mod. There in the chamber they were falling to the deck around him and crying for help even as the lack of air caused their thinning voices to fail. He felt the lock opening of the small lifeship under his groping hands, his blood-flooded eyes only able to make out shadows before him. He climbed into the interior and called on his last ounce of strength to activate the catapult.

When he regained consciousness, various pieces of wreckage from the great exploration ship were still drifting near him.

He was saved by an unbelievable coincidence. The catastrophe had happened in the vicinity of a solar system. He chose the only available oxygen world for a landing place. With new confidence he disembarked from the lifeboat. Maybe he would find here a space-travelling race of people who could help him to get back to his home planet.

He was bitterly disappointed. Granted, there were intelligent natives here, but their civilization was only in its beginning stages. Even if he were to intervene and accelerate their technical development, it would not suffice for what he needed. So he ultimately resigned himself to remaining on this planet forever. He activated his *psi* powers in order to make a thorough study of the habits and customs of the local inhabitants. After all, if he were going to stay here he might as well lead a reasonably comfortable life. A number of changes in his cellular structure enabled him to take on the appearance of an Eppanian, as the indigenous people called themselves.

And he gave himself a name: Mataal!

Later he applied himself to the career of a gladiator in the arena and the fame he won as a result of his inexhaustible special faculties made him rise quickly in popularity. He sought to forget his home world but the primitive level of Eppanian society was unable to satisfy him.

Then one day he received a shock of surprise—in the form of a telepathic contact. Could it be possible that a telepath might be living among these barbarians? Mataal was overjoyed. His expectations were exceeded by far.

A small spaceship had landed on the planet not far from the city and had infiltrated a telepathic being. It was a young man from some alien race who had disguised himself as an Eppanian. But the disguise pointed out the fact that although his race possessed the gift of telepathy it was not capable of molecular and cellular transformation.

Here was his great opportunity. With the help of the telepath he would perhaps be able to return to his home planet. Even if he failed in that, at least he'd be able to live a fuller life among the peoples of this telepathic race. He was tired of primitive existence and longed once more to go out and prove himself by great deeds.

He carefully studied the newcomer and so he learned through Goldstein every detail of the motive behind his presence here. Goldstein's extensive knowledge in general concerning the Solar Empire plus his specific information regarding Perry Rhodan were items that unfolded before Mataal, giving him a vivid impression of a young, progressive race of humans who had entered the phase of expansion into the universe.

Thousands of years ago, Mataal's race had also been numerous and powerful but now things were different. The last survivors of his kind had been in the process of launching expeditions from a very small solar system out into the immeasurable reaches of space in order to add what they could to their already extensive knowledge. Mataal's race was slowly shrinking in numbers and seemed to be waning in a down-phase without any hope of halting the process. Mataal knew that they were at the end of a long cycle—their grand epoch was at the autumnal equinox of its days.

For such reasons as this, the Terranian represented a great opportunity. The advent of the stranger opened for Mataal the possibility of again taking part in events on a cosmic scale. He discovered that there were only few humans who were gifted with psi faculties. In other words, they were also just making their beginnings in the expansion of their paranormal potentials. Therefore, if he himself were to operate shrewdly and with careful circumspection he would be able to make a contribution of perhaps inestimable value to his once mighty race.

Mataal controlled himself, taking care not to rush his plans, but he proceeded tenaciously in small ways to prepare the telepath for his purposes. He decided to keep himself in the background. While Goldstein inadvertently performed his work for him, he would be able to observe and learn and work out further stages of planning.

It hadn't been much of an effort to join Goldstein when he was taken on board the guppy again. Of course he put up a convincing fight for the aliens before he allowed himself to be 'kidnapped'.

Goldstein, who was nothing more than a tool in Mataal's hands, began to operate as directed. Mataal had worked out everything very thoroughly. The young telepath had to think that his new powers were

something that had always been slumbering within him. Gently, Mataal guided him along the desired course of action. Adroitly, so that Goldstein would not detect the source, he had awakened megalomaniac ideas in the mutant. In order to avoid internal conflicts in the youngster, Mataal had been careful to dissipate any pangs of conscience. There was only one incident where Goldstein succeeded in momentarily escaping the clutches of psychic coercion. While Mataal was deeply immersed in a study of the crew members, he noticed almost too late that Goldstein was attempting to warn the Commander.

Mataal penetrated more deeply into the mutant so that such incidents would be impossible in the future. While Goldstein continued to believe that he was conquering the vessel for his own purposes, Mataal could study the mentalities of the humans without detection. He had to learn, learn, learn. Only then could he seriously consider confronting this race of people so that he could rule over them and have them serve his goals.

When the first demonstrations of paralysis occurred, the eye of suspicion turned immediately to him. This he had expected. This was the critical point that he had to get past without revealing his true nature. Thanks to his impregnable calm and self-control he was able to appease them and dissipate their feelings of distrust. When the medico gave him an injection, he pretended to be affected by it and they believed it.

The men began to suspect and blame each other. Mataal thus obtained an insight into a great number of human motivational factors. The various characteristics of this one small group afforded him a reliable key to their entire race, by inference.

And what a race this must be! Mirrored in the thoughts of these men was the archetypal image of their life and death, their battles, victories and defeats. Mataal came to know of their joys and sorrows, their humour and their earnestness, of their loves and hates. He was overwhelmed by the aspect of such a sentimental and sensitive way of life. How was it possible for them to have developed with such explosive rapidity. It would have seemed more logical to him if these strange beings had torn each other to pieces by now because each of them harboured his own personal ambition.

How it had been possible for such a mass of individualists to follow any goal in their common interest remained a mystery for Mataal. Since the combined knowledge of the crew could not be hidden from him, he came to suspect that the existence of the Arkonides was no small factor in the development of humanity. Assistance from the Arkonides had been more or less on an involuntary basis—thanks to the adroit manoeuvrings of this legendary Perry Rhodan, whose image appeared to dominate the minds of the crew members.

Perry Rhodan—there was his man! Only through him would Mataal be able to realize his ambitious designs. Was it not miraculous that an unforeseen shipwreck should be the means for his own race to regain a foothold on life and once more assume an important role in the great drama of the Cosmos?

Since Goldstein was not particularly restricted in his own freedom of action, he began to modify some of the concepts and ideas that had been suggested to him by Mataal. The mutant experimented with pseudo-bodies in order to test his power over them. And here was a further key to fathoming human behaviour. Mataal did not hinder Goldstein in these attempts because they could hardly encroach upon the main issue at hand.

After Goldstein had paralysed almost all of the spacemen, the time drew nearer for the Commander to begin suspecting the mutant. Mataal had secretly armed himself in case it became necessary to take direct action. But Goldstein went ahead and fully played the role Mataal had assigned him to: that of the power-obsessed megalomaniac. Nevertheless, Mataal was able to sense the youngster's subconscious uneasiness. What he was doing was in conflict with Goldstein's true nature. So Mataal's psychic grip on

him continued to tighten so that he could hold him in the vice.

The men who had been released from their trance began to fight against Goldsteins demands. Mataal could now appreciate his own foresight in having worked indirectly through the mutant, since the latter was better attuned to his own kind and could therefore detect and react to human emotions more swiftly. He himself could have continued to secure his own retreat by remaining incognito but now there was no more time in which to acquire new knowledge concerning these people.

Mataal's thoughts returned to the present. His weariness was gone. He felt refreshed and was his old enterprising self again.

Beneath the bridge he sensed the faint pulse of another' pseudo-form which the mutant was hiding there. Mataal was certain that the men were not paying attention to him. For them he was a barbarian grown weak from homesickness, who was forced to share their fate. They didn't have time for sympathy, however, because they were completely occupied with forging their plans of attack against Goldstein.

Their persistence in the face of multiple defeats was astonishing. Mataal knew he had to take into account the fact that he would later be confronted with men of a similar character—human beings who were not easily resigned to subjugation and would continue to fight even in the face of hopeless odds.

* * * *

Goldstein slowly guided the second pseudo-form from underneath the bridge. What would happen if he were to add both of the synthesized masses together? How would such a glob of matter react to being outside the *Fauna* in empty space? Would it still continue to be controllable?

The mutant permitted the second pseudo-body to come closer. It wouldn't do any harm if the crew became aware of it. Along with the other block of pseudo-material hanging over their heads it was an additional demonstration of his power.

Goldstein kept the chunk of matter hovering nearby, the chunk he had put together out of the former pieces of the staircase. A swift survey of the thoughts of the men did not reveal that he was in danger at the moment. So he could continue his work undisturbed.

He then combined the two pseudo-masses and caused them to disappear. Actually, he guided the total assembly toward the outer hull of the ship. Then he hesitated, considering a precaution. Maybe it would be better to carry out the next stage of the experiment inside the airlock.

While Goldstein stood there behind the navigation table and kept a sharp eye on his immediate surroundings, the enlarged pseudo-body floated into the airlock. To steer the thing, a fraction of Goldstein's paranormal essence had to go with it. It worked the same way it had in penetrating the walls of the cabins: Goldstein brought the accumulated blob of matter outside into the abyss of space.

What followed was like a log-jam breaking, releasing a new series of events like an uncontrollable flood. That part of Goldstein's mind which had been guiding the pseudo-body now found itself outside of the ship—and also beyond the invisible grasp of Mataal.

It was a curious process, comparable to the first tender probings of a plant before breaking upward from the earth. The first effect was a painful amplification of Goldstein's sense of uneasiness. In some terrifying way he felt split in half—as though there were two of him. His mind was subdivided into two separate planes which were fundamentally opposed to one another. That part of his consciousness which had been carried outside by his paranormal faculties seemed to be trying to transmit important information to him. Everything in Goldstein rose up in a bristling conflict, his other-consciousness striving desperately to prevent a transmission of the vital message.

His deep sense of uneasiness grew and grew. It pushed and bored its way upward. That part of his being which had withdrawn itself from Mataal's control fought in a silent frenzy against the stubborn vice that still held him imprisoned.

* * * *

Mataal did not recognize his mistake until the pseudo-body was already outside the guppy. Abruptly he found his secure position to be disrupted. Panic seized him. Only quick action now would be able to save him. The terrible realization that he seemed on the verge of losing this great opportunity for his race in a matter of moments threatened to incapacitate him.

The thrust of paranormal power radiating from the pseudo-body became stronger. Unconsciously, Goldstein was pouring more of his intrinsic essence outside the ship. In but a few moments he would be able to comprehend the true state of affairs.

The pseudo-form had to be destroyed. Mataal slackened his hold on Goldstein's mind in order to concentrate all his strength on this other task.

That was his second mistake. While he devoted all of his attention to the situation outside the airlock, he gave Goldstein enough time to receive the information that the freed portion of his consciousness was stubbornly trying to transmit.

* * * *

Goldstein's inner unrest was converted into a frightening realization. The resulting mental torment caused him to groan aloud. The men around him were startled. They tensed in the expectation of a sudden weakening on the part of the mutant.

A shock ran through Goldstein as Mataal began to dissolve the pseudo-body in space. Almost simultaneously a stifling shield seemed to shatter within his head. He heaved a great sigh of relief.

In graphic clarity he saw the truth. What had he done? What misdeeds had he been forced to perpetrate here? He felt the waves of hatred directed against him from those around him.

Mataal didn't give him any more time for reflection. The blob of matter returned suddenly inside the

K-262. And immediately the pressure returned to his brain.

But Goldstein had recognized his enemy and now took up the battle. He let a portion of his paranormal strength pour back into the pseudo-form that hung poised over the bridge in order to have a wider range for meeting Mataal's wild onslaught.

The spacemen knew nothing of the strange duel that raged invisibly around them. Of course they saw the young mutant's face strain under the effort and sweat emerge on his forehead. But no word was spoken.

The sheer mortification of knowing that all this time he had been nothing but a lowly tool in the hands of another was enough to drive Goldstein to superhuman efforts. The dam had broken completely. A stubborn young man had regained his freedom and was prepared to defend it. A spark had ignited in Goldstein, which now burst into flame and burned inextinguishably within him, setting every last corner of his consciousness on fire.

He had to vanquish Mataal!

* * * *

Mataal withdrew his attention momentarily from the block of pseudo-matter which he had brought to a position above him. He sprang to his feet as Goldstein's thoughts assailed him with an unbridled savagery. He sought to tighten his hold on the mutant but it was too late.

"Mataal!" Goldstein's voice rang out on the bridge while everybody ducked from previous experience. "Mataal—I'm onto you now!"

Mataal trembled visibly. With a tremendous effort he fought for his self-possession. Now he must enter the fray directly. The men had not yet caught the meaning of Goldstein's shoutings and they stood where they were, hesitating.

The faculties Mataal had bestowed upon Goldstein back on Eppan had to be extinguished, after which he would have to take over the mutant's position. It would leave him no time for further observations but it would increase his safety considerably.

With pitiless strength, Mataal bruted his way into the appropriate regions of the other's inner self. Glowing hot needles pierced Goldstein's brain. High-tension mental currents shorted and discharged within him as a madness of dissolution threatened the youthful mutant. It all happened within the span of a second. Then suddenly Goldstein reverted to the ordinary telepath that he had always been.

That was Mataal's third and final mistake!

Even as he sensed a triumphant relief he stood on the brink of destruction. The pseudo-mass above him was suddenly deprived of its supporting essence. It became an ordinary block of metal and under the influence of the gravitational field that was generated inside the guppy it represented a weight of several hundred pounds.

It was an inert chunk of matter that crashed down on top of Mataal and buried him under its weight.

Mataal had no time to meditate on the consequences. Perhaps it was just as well. His demise was a final judgment which condemned his race to slow extinction in some far corner of the universe.

* * * *

Goldstein's mesmerized condition faded from him. He covered his face with his hands and sobbed. He seemed to sink under a tidal wave of exhaustion. His eyes only perceived blurred outlines and quivering shadow shapes before him. He heard Everson's voice as he shouted some kind of command.

Then somebody was very close to him. By making a tremendous effort he was able to make out who it was—the Colonel.

"It's all over, Goldstein," said Everson.

"It was Mataal," he whispered. "I'm innocent!"

"I know, my son," said the Commander. "It's alright. I'm sure you're exhausted. When you've regained your strength you may be able to remove that big chunk of metal from the bridge so that Dr. Morton can get to the alien's corpse."

Goldstein's vision became clearer. He looked across the area to where the block had smashed Mataal to the deck. The alien's head was visible and had not been damaged. Death had brought on an uncanny alteration in him. The hard Eppanian features had shrunk into a bat-like caricature. The face was still somewhat human—and yet inhuman.

"I can't help you, Colonel," said Goldstein, almost gratified by the fact. "I'm not able to move matter around any more.

"What a monstrosity!" whispered Weiss as he cautiously approached Mataal's remains.

"Wrong," Goldstein corrected. "What do you know about him anyway? He was no monstrosity. I was a part of him and I can understand his behaviour. He thought first of his people and only then of himself. Do you understand, Weiss? He wasn't bad or a monster—he was just... something else."

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE HORROR

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE HORDES OF DRUUFON.

They constitute a clear and present danger on distant Grautier, the Solar Empire's forward base 6562 light-years from the homeworld, Earth.

Grautier is in a state of alarm as the Terran Spacefleet prepares to engage in battle with the enemy Druufs.

Out around Grautier a unique phenomenon is occurring: two time-planes are beginning to stabilize—the Einstein continuum that includes our own Earth and that other continuum of the menacing alien universe of the Druufs.

The ferocious foe is not unknown to Atlan for he fought them 10,000 years ago in his youth and is wary of them now. He warns Perry Rhodan of the peril they portend and his friend heeds the warning and develops an audacious plan.

Little as the peacelord likes it, a blood-red haze of battle is about to explode in

THE CRIMSON UNIVERSE

By

K.-H. Scheer

