

Concealment

By A. E. van Vogt

The Earth ship came so swiftly around the planetless Gisser sun that the alarm system in the meteorite weather station had no time to react. The great machine was already visible when Watcher grew aware of it.

Alarms must have blared in the ship, too, for it slowed noticeably and, still braking, disappeared. Now it was coming back, creeping along, obviously trying to locate the small object that had affected its energy screens.

It loomed vast in the glare of the distant yellow-white sun, bigger even at this distance than anything ever seen by the Fifty Suns, a very hell ship out of remote space, a monster from a semi-mythical world, instantly recognizable from the descriptions in the history books as a battleship of Imperial Earth. Dire had been the warnings in the histories of what would happen someday-and here it was.

He knew his duty. There was a warning, the age-long dreaded warning, to send to the Fifty Suns by the non-directional sub-space radio; and he had to make sure nothing telltale remained of the station.

There was no fire. As the overloaded atomic engines dissolved, the massive building that had been a weather sub-station simply fell into its component elements.

Watcher made no attempt to escape. His brain, with its knowledge, must not be tapped. He felt a brief, blinding spasm of pain as the energy tore him to atoms.

She didn't bother to accompany the expedition that landed on the meteorite. But she watched with intent eyes through the astroplate.

From the very first moment that the spy rays had shown a human figure in a weather station-a weather

station out here- she had known the surpassing importance of the discovery. Her mind leaped instantly to the several possibilities.

Weather stations meant interstellar travel. Human beings meant Earth origin. She visualized how it could have happened:

an expedition long ago; it must have been long ago because now they had interstellar travel, and that meant large populations on many planets.

His majesty, she thought, would be pleased.

So was she. In a burst of generosity, she called the energy room.

'Your prompt action, Captain Clone,' she said warmly, 'in inclosing the entire meteorite in a sphere of protective energy is commendable, and will be rewarded.'

The man whose image showed on the astroplate, bowed. 'Thank you, noble lady.' He added: 'I think we saved the electronic and atomic components of the entire station. Unfortunately, because of the interference of the atomic energy of the station itself, I understand the photographic department was not so successful in obtaining clear prints.'

The woman smiled grimly, said: 'The man will be sufficient, and that is a matrix for which we need no prints.'

She broke the connection, still smiling, and returned her gaze to the scene on the meteorite. As she watched the energy and matter absorbers in their glowing gluttony, she thought:

There had been several storms on the map in that weather station. She'd seen them in the spy ray; and one of the storms had been very large. Her great ship couldn't dare to go fast while the location of that storm was in doubt.

Rather a handsome young man he had seemed in the flashing glimpse she had had in the spy ray, strong-willed, brave. Should be interesting in an uncivilized sort of fashion.

First, of course, he'd have to be conditioned, drained of relevant information. Even now a mistake might make it necessary to begin a long, laborious search. Centuries could be wasted on these short distances of a few light years, where a ship couldn't get up speed, and where it dared not maintain velocity, once attained, without exact weather information.

She saw that the men were leaving the meteorite. Decisively, she clicked off the intership communicator, made an adjustment

and stepped through a transmitter into the receiving room half a mile distant.

The officer in charge came over and saluted. He was frowning:

'I have just received the prints from the photographic department. The blur of energy haze over the map is particularly distressing. I would say that we should first attempt to reconstitute the building and its contents, leaving the man to the last.'

He seemed to sense her disapproval, Went on quickly:

'After all, he comes under the common human matrix. His reconstruction, while basically somewhat more difficult, falls into the same category as your stepping through the transmitter in the main bridge and coming to this room. In both cases there is dissolution of elements-which must be brought back into the original solution.'

The woman said: 'But why leave him to the last?'

'There are technical reasons having to do with the greater complexity of inanimate objects. Organized matter, as you know, is little more than a hydro-carbon compound, easily conjured.'

'Very well.' She wasn't as sure as he that a man and his brain, with the knowledge that had made the map, was less important than the map itself. But if both could be had- She nodded with decision. 'Proceed.'

She watched the building take shape inside the large receiver. It slid out finally on wings of antigravity, and was deposited in the center of the enormous metal floor.

The technician came down from his control chamber shaking his head. He led her and the half dozen others who had arrived, through the rebuilt weather station, pointing out the defects.

'Only twenty-seven sun points showing on the map,' he said. 'That is ridiculously low, even assuming that these people are organized for only a small area of space. And, besides, notice how many storms are shown, some considerably beyond the area of the reconstituted suns and-'

He stopped, his gaze fixed on the shadowy floor behind a machine twenty feet away.

The woman's eyes followed his. A man lay there, his body twisting.

'I thought,' she said frowning, 'the man was to be left to the last.'

The scientist was apologetic: 'My assistant must have misunderstood. They-'

The woman cut him off: 'Never mind. Have him sent at once to Psychology House, and tell Lieutenant Neslor I shall be there shortly.'

'At once, noble lady.'

Wait! Give my compliments to the senior meteorologist and ask him to come down here, examine this map, and advise me of his findings.'

She whirled on the group around her, laughing through her even, white teeth. 'By space, here's action at last after ten dull years of surveying. We'll rout out these hide-and-go-seekers in short order.'

Excitement blazed inside her like a living force.

The strange thing to Watcher was that he knew before he wakened why he was still alive. Not very long before.

He felt the approach of consciousness. Instinctively, he began his normal Dellian preawakening muscle, nerve and mind exercises. In the middle of the curious rhythmic system, his brain paused in a dreadful surmise.

Returning to consciousness? He!

It was at that point, as his brain threatened to burst from his head with shock, that the knowledge came of how it had been done.

He grew quiet, thoughtful. He stared at the young woman who reclined on a chaise longue near his bed. She had a fine, oval face and a distinguished appearance for so young a person. She was studying him from sparkling gray eyes. Under that steady gaze, his mind grew very still.

He thought finally: 'I've been conditioned to an easy awakening. What else did they do-find out?'

The thought grew until it seemed to swell his brainpan:

WHAT ELSE?

He saw that the woman was smiling at him, a faint, amused smile. It was like a tonic. He grew even calmer as the woman said in a silvery voice:

'Do not be alarmed. That is, not too alarmed. What is your name?'

Watcher parted his lips, then closed them again, and shook his

head grimly. He had the impulse to explain then that even answering one question would break the thrall of Dellian mental inertia and result in the revelation of valuable information.

But the explanation would have constituted a different kind of defeat. He suppressed it, and once more shook his head.

The young woman, he saw, was frowning. She said: 'You won't answer a simple question like that? Surely, your name can do no harm.'

His name, Watcher thought, then what planet he was from, where the planet was in relation to the Gisser sun, what about intervening storms. And so on down the line. There wasn't any end.

Every day that he could hold these people away from the information they craved would give the Fifty Suns so much more time to organize against the greatest machine that had ever flown into this part of space.

His thought trailed. The woman was sitting up, gazing at him with eyes that had gone steely. Her voice held a metallic resonance as she said:

'Know this, whoever you are, that you are aboard the Imperial Battleship Star Cluster, Grand Captain Laurr at your service. Know, too, that it is our unalterable will that you shall prepare for us an orbit that will take our ship safely to your chief planet.'

She went on vibrantly: 'It is my solemn belief you already know that Earth recognizes no separate governments. Space is indivisible. The universe shall not be an area of countless sovereign peoples squabbling and quarreling for power.

'That is the law. Those who set themselves against it are outlaws, subject to any punishment which may be decided upon in their special case.

'Take warning.'

Without waiting for an answer, she turned her head. 'Lieutenant Neslor,' she said at the wall facing Watcher, 'have you made any progress?'

A woman's voice answered: 'Yes, noble lady. I have set up an integer based on the Muir-Grayson studies of colonial peoples who have been isolated from the main stream of galactic life. There is no historical precedent for such a long isolation as seems to have obtained here, so I have decided to assume that

they have passed the static period, and have made some progress of their own.

'I think we should begin very simply, however. A few forced answers will open his brain to further pressures, and we can draw valuable conclusions meanwhile from the speed with which he adjusts his resistance to the brain machine. Shall I proceed?'

The woman on the chaise longue nodded. There was a flash of light from the wall facing Watcher. He tried to dodge, and discovered for the first time that something held him in the bed, not rope, or chain, nothing visible. But something as palpable as rubbery steel.

Before he could think further, the light was in his eyes, in his mind, a dazzling fury. Voices seemed to push through it, voices that danced and sang, and spoke into his brain, voices that said:

'A simple question like that-of course I'll answer . . . of course, of course, of course- My name is Gisser Watcher. I was born on the planet Kaider III, of Dellian parents. There are seventy inhabited planets, fifty suns, thirty billion people, four hundred important storms, the biggest at Latitude 473. The Central Government is on the glorious planet, Cassidor VII.'

With a blank horror of what he was doing, Watcher caught his roaring mind into a Dellian knot, and stopped that devastating burst of revelation. He knew he would never be caught like that again but-too late, he thought, too late by far.

The woman wasn't quite so certain. She went out of the bedroom, and came presently to where the middle-aged Lieutenant Neslor was classifying her findings on receptor spools.

The psychologist glanced up from her work, said in an amazed voice: 'Noble lady, his resistance during the stoppage moment registered an equivalent of IQ 800. Now, that's utterly impossible, particularly because he started talking at a pressure point equivalent to IQ 167, which matches with his general appearance, and which you know is average.

'There must be a system of mind training behind his resistance. And I think I found the clue in his reference to his Dellian ancestry. His graph squared in intensity when he used the word.

'This is very serious, and may cause great delay-unless we are prepared to break his mind.'

The grand captain shook her head, said only: 'Report further developments to me.'

On the way to the transmitter, she paused to check the battleship's position. A bleak smile touched her lips, as she saw on the reflector the shadow of a ship circling the brighter shadow of a sun.

Marking time, she thought, and felt a chill of premonition. Was it possible that one man was going to hold up a ship strong enough to conquer an entire galaxy?

The senior ship meteorologist, Lieutenant Cannons, stood up from a chair as she came toward him across the vast floor of the transmission receiving room, where the Fifty Suns weather station still stood. He had graying hair, and he was very old, she remembered, very old. Walking toward him, she thought:

There was a slow pulse of life in these men who watched the great storms of space. There must be to them a sense of futility about it all, a timelessness. Storms that took a century or more to attain their full roaring maturity, such storms and the men who catalogued them must acquire a sort of affinity of spirit.

The slow stateliness was in his voice, too, as he bowed with a measure of grace, and said:

'Grand Captain, the Right Honourable Gloria Cecily, the Lady Lurr of Noble Lurr, I am honoured by your personal presence.'

She acknowledged the greeting, and then unwound the spool for him. He listened, frowning, said finally:

'The latitude he gave for the storm is a meaningless quantity. These incredible people have built up a sun relation system in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, in which the center is an arbitrary one having no recognizable connection with the magnetic center of the whole Cloud. Probably, they've picked some sun, called it center, and built their whole spatial geography around it.'

The old man whirled abruptly away from her, and led the way into the weather station, to the edge of the pit above which poised the reconstructed weather map.

'The map is utterly worthless to us,' he said succinctly.

'What?'

She saw that he was staring at her, his china-blue eyes thoughtful.

'Tell me, what is your idea of this map?'

The woman was silent, unwilling to commit herself in the face of so much definiteness. Then she frowned, and said:

'My impression is much as you described. They've got a system of their own here, and all we've got to do is find the key.'

She finished more confidently: 'Our main problems, it seems to me, would be to determine which direction we should go in the immediate vicinity of this meteorite weather station we've found. If we chose the wrong direction, there would be vexatious delay, and, throughout, our chief obstacle would be that we dare not go fast because of possible storms.'

She looked at him questioningly, as she ended. And saw that he was shaking his head, gravely:

'I'm afraid,' he said, 'it's not so simple as that. Those bright point-replicas of suns look the size of peas due to light distortion, but when examined through a metroscope they show only a few molecules in diameter. If that is their proportion to the suns they represent-'

She had learned in genuine crises to hide her feelings from subordinates. She stood now, inwardly stunned, outwardly cool, thoughtful, calm. She said finally:

'You mean each one of those suns, their suns, is buried among about a thousand other suns?'

Worse than that. I would say that they have only inhabited one system in ten thousand. We must never forget that the Lesser Magellanic Cloud is a universe of fifty million stars. That's a lot of sunshine.'

The old man concluded quietly: 'If you wish, I will prepare orbits involving maximum speeds of ten light days a minute to all the nearest stars. We may strike it lucky.'

The woman shook her head savagely: 'One in ten thousand. Don't be foolish. I happen to know the law of averages that relates to ten thousand. We would have to visit a minimum of twenty-five hundred suns if we were lucky, thirty-five to fifty thousand if we were not.'

'No, no'-a grim smile compressed her fine lips-'we're not going to spend five hundred years looking for a needle in a haystack. I'll trust to psychology before I trust to chance. We have

the man who understands the map, and while it will take time, he'll talk in the end.'

She started to turn away, then stopped. 'What,' she asked, 'about the building itself? Have you drawn any conclusions from its design?'

He nodded. 'Of the type used in the galaxy about fifteen thousand years ago.'

'Any improvements, changes?'

'None that I can see. One observer, who does all the work. Simple, primitive.'

She stood thoughtful, shaking her head as if trying to clear away a mist.

'It seems strange. Surely after fifteen thousand years they could have added something. Colonies are usually static, but not that static.'

She was examining routine reports three hours later when her astro clanged twice, softly. Two messages- The first was from Psychology House, a single question: 'Have we permission to break the prisoner's mind?'

'No!' said Grand Captain Laurr.

The second message made her glance across at the orbit board. The board was aglitter with orbit symbols. That wretched old man, disobeying her injunction NOT to prepare any orbits.

Smiling twistedly, she walked over and studied the shining things, and finally sent an order to Central Engines. She watched as her great ship plunged into night.

After all, she thought, there was such a thing as playing two games at the same time. Counterpoint was older in human relations than it was in music.

The first day she stared down at the outer planet of a blue-white sun. It floated in the darkness below the ship, an airless mass of rock and metal, drab and terrible as any meteorite, a world of primeval canyons and mountains untouched by the leavening breath of life.

Spy rays showed only rock, endless rock, not a sign of movement or of past movement.

There were three other planets, one of them a warm, green world where winds sighed through virgin forests and animals swarmed on the plains.

Not a house showed, nor the erect form of a human being.

Grimly, the woman said into the intership communicator: 'Exactly how far can our spy rays penetrate into the ground?'

'A hundred feet.'

'Are there any metals which can simulate a hundred feet of earth?'

'Several, noble lady.'

Dissatisfied, she broke the connection. There was no call that day from Psychology House.

The second day, a giant red sun swam into her impatient ken. Ninety-four planets swung in their great orbits around their massive parent. Two were habitable, but again there was the profusion of wilderness and of animals usually found only on planets untouched by the hand and metal of civilization.

The chief zoological officer reported the fact in his precise voice: 'The percentage of animals parallels the mean for worlds not inhabited by intelligent beings.'

The woman snapped: 'Has it occurred to you that there may have been a deliberate policy to keep animal life abundant, and laws preventing the tilling of the soil even for pleasure?'

She did not expect, nor did she receive, an answer. And once more there was not a word from Lieutenant Neslor, the chief psychologist.

The third sun was farther away. She had the speed stepped up to twenty light days a minute-and received a shocking reminder as the ship bludgeoned into a small storm. It must have been small because the shuddering of metal had barely begun when it ended.

'There has been some talk,' she said afterward to the thirty captains assembled in the captains' pool, 'that we return to the galaxy and ask for an expedition that will uncover these hidden rascals.'

'One of the more whining of the reports that have come to my ears suggests that, after all, we were on our way home when we made our discovery, and that our ten years in the Cloud have earned us a rest.'

Her gray eyes flashed; her voice grew icy: 'You may be sure that those who sponsor such defeatism are not the ones who would have to make the personal report of failure to his maj'

esty's government. Therefore, let me assure the faint hearts and the homesick that we shall remain another ten years if it should prove necessary. Tell the officers and crew to act accordingly. That is all.'

Back in the main bridge, she saw that there was still no call from Psychology House. There was a hot remnant of anger and impatience in her, as she dialed the number. But she controlled herself as the distinguished face of Lieutenant Neslor appeared on the plate. She said then:

'What is happening, lieutenant? I am anxiously waiting for further information from the prisoner.'

The woman psychologist shook her head. 'Nothing to report.'

'Nothing!' Her amazement was harsh in her voice.

'I have asked twice,' was the answer, 'for permission to break his mind. You must have known that I would not lightly suggest such a drastic step.'

'Oh!' She had known, but the disapproval of the people at home, the necessity for accounting for any amoral action against individuals, had made refusal an automatic action. Now- Before she could speak, the psychologist went on:

'I have made some attempts to condition him in his sleep, stressing the uselessness of resisting Earth when eventual discovery is sure. But that has only convinced him that his earlier revelations were-of no benefit to us.'

The leader found her voice: 'Do you really mean, lieutenant, that you have no plan other than violence? Nothing?'

In the astroplate, the image head made a negative movement. The psychologist said simply:

'An 800 IQ resistance in a 167 IQ brain is something new in my experience.'

The woman felt a great wonder. 'I can't understand it,' she complained. 'I have a feeling we've missed some vital clue. Just like that we run into a weather station in a system of fifty million suns, a station in which there is a human being who, contrary to all the laws of self-preservation, immediately kills himself to prevent himself from falling into our hands.'

'The weather station itself is an old model galactic affair, which shows no improvements after fifteen thousand years; and yet the vastness of the time elapsed, the caliber of the brains in-

olved suggest that all the obvious changes should have been made.

'And the man's name, Watcher, is so typical of the ancient prespaceship method of calling names on Earth according to the trade. It is possible that even the sun, where he is watching, is a service heritage of his family. There's something-depressing- here somewhere that-'

She broke off, frowning: 'What is your plan?' After a minute, she nodded. 'I see . . . very well, bring him to one of the bedrooms in the main bridge. And forget that part about making up one of our strong-arm girls to look like me. I'll do everything that's necessary. Tomorrow. Fine.'

Coldly she sat watching the prisoner's image in the plate. The man, Watcher, lay in bed, an almost motionless figure, eyes closed, but his face curiously tense. He looked, she thought, like someone

discovering that for the first time in four days, the invisible force lines that had bound him had been withdrawn.

Beside her, the woman psychologist hissed: 'He's still suspicious, and will probably remain so until you partially ease his mind. His general reactions will become more and more concentrated. Every minute that passes will increase his conviction that he will have only one chance to destroy the ship, and that he must be decisively ruthless regardless of risk.'

'I have been conditioning him the past ten hours to resistance to us in a very subtle fashion. You will see in a moment .

nh-h!'

Watcher was sitting up in bed. He poked a leg from under the sheets, then slid forward, and onto his feet. It was an oddly powerful movement.

He stood for a moment, a tall figure in gray pajamas. He had evidently been planning his first actions because, after a swift look at the door, he walked over to a set of drawers built into one wall, tugged at them tentatively, and then jerked them open with an effortless strength, snapping their locks one by one.

Her own gasp was only an echo of the gasp of Lieutenant Neslor.

'Good heavens!' the psychologist said finally. 'Don't ask me to explain how he's breaking those metal locks. Strength must be a by-product of his Dellian training. Noble lady-'

Her tone was anxious; and the grand captain looked at her. 'Yes?'

'Do you think, under the circumstances, you should play such a personal role in his subjection? His strength is obviously such that he can break the body of anyone aboard-'

She was cut off by an imperious gesture. 'I cannot,' said the Right Honourable Gloria Cecily, 'risk some fool making a mistake. I'll take an antipain pill. Tell me when it is time to go in.'

Watcher felt cold, tense, as he entered the instrument room of the main bridge. He had found his clothes in some locked drawers. He hadn't known they were there, but the drawers aroused his curiosity. He made the preliminary Dellian extra energy movements; and the locks snapped before his super strength.

Pausing on the threshold, he flicked his gaze through the great domed room. And after a moment his terrible fear that he and his kind were lost, suffered another transfusion of hope. He was actually free.

These people couldn't have the faintest suspicion of the truth. The great genius, Joseph H Dell, must be a forgotten man on Earth. Their release of him must have behind it some plan of course but- 'Death,' he thought ferociously, 'death to them all, as they had once inflicted death, and would again.'

He was examining the bank on bank of control boards when, out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the

woman step from the nearby wall.

He looked up; he thought with a savage joy: The leader! They'd have guns protecting her, naturally, but they wouldn't know that all these days he had been frantically wondering how he could force the use of guns.

Surely to space, they couldn't be prepared to gather up his component elements again. Their very act of freeing him had showed psychology intentions.

Before he could speak, the woman said, smilingly: 'I really shouldn't let you examine those controls. But we have decided on a different tactic with you. Freedom of the ship, an opportu-

nity to meet the crew. We want to convince you . . . convince you-'

Something of the bleakness and implacableness of him must have touched her. She faltered, shook herself in transparent self-annoyance, then smiled more firmly, and went on in a persuasive tone:

'We want you to realize that we're not ogres. We want to end your alarm that we mean harm to your people. You must know, now we have found you exist, that discovery is only a matter of time.

'Earth is not cruel, or dominating, at least not any more. The barest minimum of allegiance is demanded, and that only to the idea of a common unity, the indivisibility of space. It is required, too, that criminal laws be uniform, and that a high minimum wage for workers be maintained. In addition, wars of any kind are absolutely forbidden.

'Except for that, every planet or group of planets, can have its own form of government, trade with whom they please, live their own life. Surely, there is nothing terrible enough in all this to justify the curious attempt at suicide you made when we discovered the weather station.'

He would, he thought, listening to her, break her head first. The best method would be to grab her by the feet, and smash her against the metal wall or floor. Bone would crush easily and the act would serve two vital purposes:

It would be a terrible and salutary warning to the other officers of the ship. And it would precipitate upon him the death fire of her guards.

He took a step toward her. And began the faintly visible muscle and nerve movements so necessary to pumping the Dellian body to a pitch of superhuman capability. The woman was saying:

'You stated before that your people have inhabited fifty suns in this space. Why only fifty? In twelve thousand or more years, a population of twelve thousand billion would not be beyond possibility.'

He took another step. And another. Then knew that he must speak if he hoped to keep her unsuspecting for those vital seconds while he inched closer, closer. He said:

'About two thirds of our marriages are childless. It has been

very unfortunate, but you see there are two types of us, and when intermarriage occurs as it does without hindrance-'

Almost he was near enough; he heard her say: 'You mean, a mutation has taken place; and the two don't mix?'

He didn't have to answer that. He was ten feet from her; and like a tiger he launched himself across the intervening gap.

The first energy beam ripped through his body too low down to be fatal, but it brought a hot scalding nausea and a dreadful heaviness. He heard the grand captain scream:

'Lieutenant Neslor, what are you doing?'

He had her then. His fingers were grabbing hard at her fending arm, when the second blow struck him high in the ribs and brought the blood frothing into his mouth. In spite of all his will, he felt his hands slipping from the woman. Oh, space, how he would have liked to take her into the realm of death with him.

Once again, the woman screamed: 'Lieutenant Neslor, are you mad? Cease firing'

Just before the third beam burned at him with its indescribable violence, he thought with a final and tremendous sardonicism: 'She still didn't suspect. But somebody did, somebody who at this ultimate moment had guessed the truth.'

'Too late,' he thought, 'too late, you fools! Go ahead and hunt. They've had warning, time to conceal themselves even more thoroughly. And the Fifty Suns are scattered, scattered among a million stars, among-'

Death caught his thought.

The woman picked herself off the floor, and stood dizzily striving to draw her roughly handled senses back into her brain. She was vaguely aware of Lieutenant Neslor coming through a transmitter, pausing at the dead body of Gisser Watcher and rushing toward her.

'Are you all right, my dear? It was so hard firing through an astroplate that-'

'You mad woman!' The grand captain caught her breath. 'Do you realize that a body can't be reconstituted once vital organs have been destroyed. Dissolution or resolution cannot be piecemeal. We'll have to go home without-'

She stopped. She saw that the psychologist was staring at her. Lieutenant Neslor said:

'His intention to attack was unmistakable and it was too soon according to my graphs. All the way through, he's never fitted anything in human psychology.

'At the very last possible moment I remembered Joseph Dell and the massacre of the Dellian supermen fifteen thousand years ago. Fantastic to think that some of them escaped and established a civilization in this remote part of space.

'Do you see now: "Dellian"-Joseph H Dell-the inventor of the Dellian perfect robot.'