

The Truth about Cushgar

There was, for a time, a good deal of puzzled and uneasy speculation about the methods that had been employed by the Confederacy of Vega in the taming of Cushgar. The disturbing part of it was that nothing really seemed to have happened!

First, the rumor was simply that the Confederacy was preparing to move into Cushgar—and then, suddenly, that it *had* moved in. This aroused surprised but pleased interest in a number of areas bordering the Confederacy. The Thousand Nations and a half-dozen similar organizations quietly flexed their military muscles, and prepared to land in the middle of the Confederacy's back as soon as it became fairly engaged in its ambitious new project. For Cushgar and the Confederacy seemed about as evenly matched as any two powers could possibly be.

But there was no engagement, then. There was not even anything resembling an official surrender. Star system by system, mighty Cushgar was accepting the governors installed by the Confederacy. Meekly, it coughed up what was left of the captive peoples and the loot it had pirated for the past seven centuries. And, very simply and quietly then, under the eyes of a dumfounded galaxy, it settled down and began mending its manners.

Then the rumors began. The wildest of them appeared to have originated in Cushgar itself, among its grim but superstitious inhabitants.

The Thousand Nations and the other rival combines gradually relaxed their various preparations and settled back disappointedly. This certainly wasn't the time to jump! The Confederacy had sneaked something over again; it was all done with by now.

But *what* had they done to Cushgar—and how?

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In the Confederacy's Council of Co-ordinators on Vega's planet of Jeltad, the Third Co-ordinator, Chief of the Department of Galactic Zones, was being freely raked over the coals by his eminent colleagues.

They, too, wanted to know about Cushgar; and he wasn't telling.

"Of course, we're not actually accusing you of anything," the Fifth Co-ordinator—Strategics—pointed out. "But you didn't expect to advance the Council's plans by sixty years or thereabouts without arousing a certain amount of curiosity, did you?"

"No, I didn't expect to do that," the Third Co-ordinator admitted.

"Come clean, Train!" said the First. Train was the name by which the Third Co-ordinator was known in this circle. "How did you do it?" Usually they were allies in these little arguments, but the First's curiosity was also rampant.

"Can't tell you!" the Third Co-ordinator said flatly. "I made a report to the College, and they'll dish out to your various departments whatever they ought to get."

He was within his rights in guarding his own department's secrets, and they knew it. As for the College—that was the College of the Pleiades, a metaphysically inclined body which was linked into the affairs of Confederacy government in a manner the College itself presumably could have defined exactly. Nobody else could. However, they were the final arbiters in a case of this kind.

The Council meeting broke up a little later. The Third Co-ordinator left with Bropha, a handsome youngish man who had been listening in, in a liaison capacity for the College.

"Let's go off and have a drink somewhere," Bropha suggested. "I'm curious myself."

The Co-ordinator growled softly. His gray hair was rumped, and he looked exhausted.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell *you*—"

Bropha's title was President of the College of the Pleiades. That was a good deal less important

than it sounded, since he was only the executive scientist in charge of the College's mundane affairs. However, he was also the Third Co-ordinator's close personal friend and had been cleared for secrets of state of any kind whatsoever.

They went off and had their drink.

"You can't blame them too much," Bropha said soothingly. "After all, the conquest of Cushgar has been regarded pretty generally as the Confederacy's principal and most dangerous undertaking in the century immediately ahead. When the Department of Galactic Zones pulls it off suddenly—apparently without preparation or losses—"

"It wasn't without losses," the Co-ordinator said glumly.

"Wasn't it?" said Bropha.

"It cost me," said the Co-ordinator, "the best Zone Agent I ever had—or ever hope to have. Remember Zamm?"

Bropha's handsome face darkened.

Yes, he remembered Zamm! There were even times when he wished he didn't remember her quite so vividly.

But two years would have been much too short an interval in any case to forget the name of the person who had saved his life—

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At the time, the discovery that His Excellency the Illustrious Bropha was lost in space had sent a well-concealed ripple of dismay throughout the government of the Confederacy. For Bropha was destined in the Confederacy's plans to become a political figure of the highest possible importance.

Even the Third Co-ordinator's habitual placidity vanished when the information first reached him. But he realized promptly that while a man lost in deep space was almost always lost for good, there were any number of mitigating factors involved in this particular case. The last report on Bropha had been received from his personal yacht, captained by his half brother Greemshard; and that ship was equipped with devices which would have tripped automatic alarms in monitor-stations thousands of light-years apart if it had been suddenly destroyed or incapacitated by any unforeseen accident or space attack.

Since no such alarm was received, the yacht was still functioning undisturbed somewhere, though somebody on board her was keeping her whereabouts a secret.

It all pointed, pretty definitely, at Greemshard!

For its own reasons, the Department of Galactic Zones had assembled a dossier on Bropha's half brother which was hardly less detailed than the information it had available concerning the illustrious scientist himself. It was no secret to its researchers that Greemshard was an ambitious, hard-driving man, who for years had chafed under the fact that the goal of his ambitions was always being reached first and without apparent effort by Bropha. The study of his personality had been quietly extended then to a point where it could be predicted with reasonable accuracy what he would do in any given set of circumstances; and with the department's psychologists busily dissecting the circumstances which surrounded the disappearance of Bropha, it soon became apparent what Greemshard had done and what he intended to do next.

A prompt check by local Zone Agents indicated that none of the powers who would be interested in getting Bropha into their hands had done so as yet, and insured, furthermore, that they could not do so now without leading the Confederacy's searchers directly to him. Which left, as the most important remaining difficulty, the fact that the number of places where the vanished yacht could be kept unobtrusively concealed was enormously large.

The number was a limited one, nevertheless—unless the ship was simply drifting about space somewhere, which was a risk no navigator of Greemshard's experience would be willing to take. And through the facilities of its home offices and laboratories and its roving army of Agents, the Third Department was equipped, as perhaps no other human organization ever had been, to produce an exact chart of all those possible points of concealment and then to check them off in the shortest possible time.

So the Co-ordinator was not in the least surprised when, on the eighth day of the search instigated by the department, a message from Zone Agent Zamman Tarradang-Pok was transferred to him, stating that Bropha had been found, alive and in reasonably good condition, and would be back in his home on Jeltad in another two weeks.

"In a way, though, it's too bad it had to be that space-pixy Zamm who found him!" one of the Co-ordinator's aides remarked.

And to that, after a moment's reflection, the Chief of Galactic Zones agreed.

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The moon where Bropha's yacht lay concealed was one of three approximately Earth-sized, ice-encrusted satellites swinging about the sullen glow of a fiery giant-planet.

The robot-ship of Zone Agent Zamman Tarradang-Pok, working along its allotted section of the general search-pattern, flashed in at the moon on a tangent to its orbit, quartered its surface in two sweeping turns and vanished again toward the nearer of the two other satellites.

All in all, that operation was completed in a matter of seconds; but before the ship left, Zone Agent Zamm had disembarked from it in a thirty-foot space-duty skiff—crammed to its skin just now with the kind of equipment required to pull off a miniature invasion-in-force. Whatever sort of camouflaged power station was down there had been shut off the instant it detected her ship's approach. While that didn't necessarily reveal a bad conscience, the momentary pattern of radiations Zamm's instruments had picked up suggested an exact duplicate of the type of engines which powered Bropha's yacht.

So it probably was the yacht, Zamm decided—and it would be hidden just below the moon's frozen surface. She had pin-pointed the spot; and on the opposite side of the big satellite the skiff came streaking down into a thin, icy atmosphere.

"You can start hoping that ship was one of those I've been waiting for," Greemshard was remarking meanwhile. "Or else just somebody who isn't interested in us."

He stood in the center of the yacht's control room, staring at Bropha with intense dislike and a touch of fear. A suspicion had begun to grow on Greemshard that with all his cleverness and planning he might have worked himself at last into an impossible situation. None of the dozens of coded messages he had sent out during the past few days had been answered or perhaps even received. It was a little uncanny.

"Whatever happens," he concluded, "they're not getting you back alive!"

Bropha, flattened by gravity shackles to one wall of the room, saw no reason to reply. For the greater part of the past week, he had been floating mentally in some far-off place, from where he detachedly controlled the ceaseless complaints of various abused nerve-endings of his body. His half brother's voice hardly registered. He had begun to review instead, for perhaps the thousandth futile time, the possibilities of the trap into which he had let Greemshard maneuver him. The chances were he would have to pay the usual penalty of stupidity, but it was unlikely that either Greemshard or his confederates would get any benefit out of that.

Bropha was quite familiar—though Greemshard was not—with the peculiar efficiency of the organization headed by his friend, the Third Co-ordinator.

"Do not move, Captain Greemshard!"

That was all that tinkling, brittle voice really said. But it was a moment or so before Bropha grasped the meaning of the words.

He had, he realized, been literally shocked into full consciousness by something that might have been the thin cry of a mindless death as it rose before its victim—a sound that ripped the clogging pain-veils from his thoughts and triggered off an explosion of sheer animal fright. Bropha's brain was a curiously sensitive tool in many ways; it chose to ignore the explicit substance of Zamm's curt warning and, instead, to read in it things like an insatiable hunger, and that ultimate threat. And also, oddly enough, a wailing, bleak despair.

Later on, he would admit readily that in his wracked condition he might have put a good deal more into the voice than was actually there. He would point out, however, that Greemshard, who was not an

imaginative man and recklessly brave, seemed to be similarly affected. His half brother, he saw, stood facing him some twenty feet away, with his back to the door that led from the control room into the main body of the yacht; and the expression on his face was one Bropha could never remember afterwards without a feeling of discomfort. There was an assortment of weapons about Greemshard's person and on a desk to one side and within easy reach of him; but for that moment at least he did not move.

Then Bropha's startled gaze shifted beyond Greemshard.

The passage door had disappeared, and a pale-green fire was trickling swiftly from about its frame. He saw Zone Agent Zamm next, standing just beyond the door with a gun in her hand, and several squat, glittering shapes looming up behind her. The shock of almost superstitious fear that had roused him left Bropha in that instant, because he knew at once who and what Zamm was.

At about the same moment, Greemshard made his bid—desperately and with the flashing speed of a big, strong animal in perfect condition.

He flung himself sideways to reach the floor behind the desk, one hand plucking at a gun in his belt; but he was still in mid-leap when some soundless force spun him about and hurled him across the room, almost to Bropha's feet. What was left of Greemshard lay twitching there violently for a few seconds more, and was still. A faint smell of ozone began to spread through the room.

Bropha looked down at the headless body and winced. As children and half-grown boys, he and Greemshard had been the best of friends; and later, he had understood his half brother better than Greemshard ever knew. For a moment at least, the events of the last few days seemed much less important than those years that were past.

Then he looked back at the figure behind the coldly flaming door frame across the room and stammered: "Thank you, Zone Agent!"

His first glance at Zamm had showed him that she was a Daya-Bal; and up to that moment he would have thought that no branch of humanity was emotionally less suited than they to perform the duties of an Agent of Galactic Zones. But under the circumstances, the person who had effected an entry into that room, in the spectacularly quiet and apparently instantaneous fashion which alone could have saved his life, was not likely to be anything else.

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Like a trio of goblin hounds, three different pieces of robotic equipment came variously gliding and floating through the glowing door frame on Zamm's heels, and began to busy themselves gently about a now rather shock-dazed Bropha. His rescuer, he found himself thinking presently, seemed really more bizarre in these surroundings than her mechanical assistants!

Zamm was not in armor but in a fitted spacesuit, so her racial characteristics were unmistakable. By ordinary human standards, the rather small Daya-Bal body was excessively thin and narrow; but Zamm's white face with its pale eyes and thin, straight nose matched it perfectly, and every motion showed the swift, unconscious grace which accounted for some of the fascination her people exerted on their more normally constructed cousins. Bropha, who had spent over a year among the Daya-Bal planets in the Betelgeuse region, and during that time had also come under the spell of what was perhaps the youngest true branch of *Genus Homo*, addressed Zamm, by and by, in her own language.

He noted her smile of quick pleasure and the flash of interest in her eyes, and listened carefully to her reply, which began as an apology for causing irreparable damage to his ship in the process of boarding it. Such responses all seemed disarmingly normal; and he felt unable to recapture the sensations which had awakened him so suddenly when he heard her challenge to Greemshard.

Greemshard's death, too—however he might feel about it personally—was, after all, simply the fate of a criminal who had been misguided enough to resist certain arrest. As it happened, Bropha never did learn the exact circumstances under which the four members of Greemshard's little gang, who were acting as the yacht's crew, had departed this life just before Zamm appeared at the control room; but it could be assumed that the situation there had been a somewhat similar one.

His explanations, however, completely failed to satisfy him—because he knew the Daya-Bals.

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He spent most of the two weeks required for the return trip to Jeltad in a bed under robotic treatment.

The physical damage his misadventure had cost him wasn't too serious, but it had to be repaired promptly; and such first-aid patchwork usually involved keeping a human brain anaesthetized to the point of complete unconsciousness. But Bropha's level of mind-training permitted him to by-pass that particular effect, and to remain as aware of his surroundings as he chose to be; and he remained much more aware of them than Zamman Tarradang-Pok or her robots appeared to realize.

To the average bedridden traveler, that endless drive on a silent ship through the unreal-seeming voids of the overspeed might have seemed monotonous to the point of dreary boredom. Bropha—alert, wondering and reflecting—soon gained a different impression of it. Little enough was actually happening; but even the slightest events here seemed weighted to him with some abnormal dark significance of their own. It was almost, he thought, as if he were catching an occasional whispered line or two of some grim drama—the actors of which moved constantly all about him but were very careful to stay out of his sight!

One day, finally, his watching was briefly rewarded; though what he observed left him, if anything, more puzzled than before. But afterwards, he found that a faint echo of the chill Zamm's voice first aroused in him had returned. In his mind, it now accompanied the slight shape which came occasionally through the shadowed passage before his cabin and, much more rarely, paused there quietly to look in on him.

Simultaneously, he discovered that a sense of something depressing and frightening had crept into his concept of this stupendously powered ship of Zamm's, with its electronic mentality through which sensations and reflexes flashed in a ceaseless billionfold shift of balances, over circuits and with meanings to which nothing remotely like a parallel existed in any human brain. Its racing drive through apparent nothingness, at speeds which no longer could be related mentally to actual motion, was like the expression of some fixed, nightmarish purpose which Bropha's presence had not changed in any way. For the moment, he was merely being carried along in the fringe of the nightmare—soon he would be expelled from it.

And then that somehow terrible unit, the woman of a race which mankind had long regarded as if they were creatures of some galactic Elfland—beings a little wiser, gentler, a little farther from the brute than their human brothers—and her train of attendant robots, of which there seemed to be a multi-shaped, grotesque insect-swarm about the ship, and finally the titanic, man-made monster that carried them all, would go rushing off again on their ceaseless, frightening search.

For what?

Without being able to give himself a really good reason for it even now, Bropha was, in brief, profoundly disturbed.

But one day he came walking up into the control room, completely healed again, though still a little uncertain in his stride and more than a little dissatisfied in his thoughts. Vega was now some twenty-five light-years away in space; but in the foreshortening magic of the ship's vision tank, its dazzling, blue-white brilliance floated like a three-inch fire-jewel before them. A few hours later, great Jeltad itself swam suddenly below with its wind-swept blues and greens and snowy poles—to the eyes of the two watchers on the ship much more like the historical Earth-home of both their races than the functional, tunneled hornet-hive that Terra was nowadays.

So Bropha came home. Being Bropha, his return was celebrated as a planetary event that night, centered about a flamboyant festival at his fine house overlooking the tall, gray towers of Government Center. Being also the Bropha who could not leave any human problem unsettled, once it came to his attention, he tried to make sure that the festival would be attended both by his rescuer and by her boss—his old friend, the Third Co-ordinator of the Vegan Confederacy.

However, only one of them appeared.

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"To tell you the truth," Bropha remarked, "I didn't expect her to show up. And to tell you the truth again, I feel almost relieved, now that she didn't." He nodded down at the thronged and musical garden stretches below the gallery in which they sat. "I can't imagine Zamm in a setting like that!"

The Co-ordinator looked. "No," he agreed thoughtfully; "Zamm wouldn't fit in."

"It would be," said Bropha, rather more dramatically than was customary for him, "like seeing some fever-dream moving about in your everyday life—it wouldn't do!"

"So you want to talk about her," the Co-ordinator said; and Bropha realized suddenly that his friend looked soberly amused.

"I do," he admitted. "In fact, it's necessary! That Agent of yours made me extremely uneasy."

The Co-ordinator nodded.

"It hasn't anything to do," Bropha went on, "with the fact of her immense personal attractiveness. After all, that's an almost uniform quality of her race. I've sometimes thought that racial quality of the Daya-Bals might be strong enough to have diverted our sufficiently confused standards of such abstractions as beauty and perfection into entirely new channels—if their people happened to be spread out among our A-Class civilizations."

The Co-ordinator laughed. "It just might be, at that! Perhaps it's fortunate for us they've lost the urges of migrating and dominating the widest possible range of surroundings."

Bropha didn't agree.

"If they hadn't lost them," he said, "they'd be something other than they are—probably something a good deal less formidable. As it is, they've concentrated on themselves. I've heard them described as metaphysicists and artists. But those are our terms. Personally I think the Daya-Bals understand such terms in a way we don't. While I was living among them, anyway, I had a constant suspicion that they moved habitually in dimensions of mental reality I didn't know of as yet—"

He stopped and hauled himself back.

"You were going to speak of Zamm," his friend reminded him.

"Well, in a way I *am* speaking of her!" Bropha said slowly. "Obviously, the mere fact that a Daya-Bal is working for you, for the Department of Galactic Zones—and operating one of those really hellish robot ships of yours—is a flat contradiction to everything we know about them. Or think we know! A fallen angel would seem much less of a paradox. And there was the manner in which she killed Greemshard—"

The Co-ordinator raised a bushy gray eyebrow.

"Naturally," Bropha assured him, "I'm not blaming her for Greemshard's death. Under the circumstances, that had become unavoidable, in any case. But Zamm killed him"—he was selecting his words carefully now—"as if she were under some inescapable compulsion to do it. I don't know how else to describe the action."

He waited, but Zamm's boss offered no comment.

"There were two other incidents," Bropha continued, "on our way back here. The first was on the same day that we took off from that chunk of ice of a moon. We chased something. I didn't see what it was and I didn't ask her. There was a little maneuvering and a fairly long, straight run, about two minutes. We got hit by something heavy enough to slow us; and then the ship's automatics went off. That was all. Whatever it was, it was finished."

"It was finished, all right!" the Co-ordinator stated. "That was a Shaggar ship. They seem to be migrating through that section. Zamm reported the incident, and as I was following your return with interest, I heard of it directly."

"I'm not questioning the ethics of your Agent's work, you know," Bropha said after a pause. "Having seen something of what the Shaggar will do to anybody who can't outfight them, I also realize that killing them, in particular, is in a class with destroying a plague virus. No, the point is simply that I saw Zamm's face immediately afterwards. She came past my cabin and looked in at me for a moment. I don't believe she actually saw me! Her eyes looked blind. And her face had no more expression than a

white stone—"

He added doubtfully, "And that's not right either! Because at the same time I had the very clear impression that she was staring past me at something. I remember thinking that she hated whatever she saw there with an intensity no sane being should feel against anything." He paused again. "You know now what I'm trying to say?"

"It's fairly obvious," the Co-ordinator replied judicially, "that you believe one of my Agents, at least, is a maniac."

"It sounds thoroughly ungrateful of me," Bropha nodded, "but that's about it—except, of course, that I don't actually believe it! However, for the sake of my own peace of mind, I'd be obliged if you'd take the trouble to look up the facts on Zone Agent Zamm and let me know what the correct explanation is."

It was the Co-ordinator who hesitated now.

"She's a killer, certainly," he said at last. He smiled faintly. "In fact, Bropha, you've been granted the distinction of being rescued by what is quite probably the grand champion killer of the department. Zamm's a Peripheral Agent—roving commission you might call it. No fixed zone of operations. When she runs out of work, she calls in to Central and has them lay out a pattern of whatever foci of disturbance there are in the areas she's headed for. She checks in here at Jeltad about once a year to have her ship equipped with any worthwhile innovations Lab's cooked up in the interval."

He reflected a moment. "I don't know," he said, "whether you were in a condition to notice much about that ship of hers?"

"Not much," Bropha admitted. "I remember, when she called it back to pick us up, it seemed bulkier than most Agent ships I'd seen—a big, dull-black spheroid mostly. I saw very little of its interior. Why?"

"As an Agent ship, it's our ultimate development in self-containment," the Co-ordinator said. "In that particular type, camouflage and inconspicuousness are largely sacrificed to other advantages. Self-repair's one of them; it could very nearly duplicate itself in case of need. Those are the peripheral ships—almost perpetual travelers. The Agents who direct them prowl along the fringes of our civilizations and deal with whatever needs to be dealt with there before it gets close enough to cause serious trouble."

"I understand the need for such Agents," Bropha said slowly. "I should think, however, that they would be selected for such work with particular care."

"They are," said the Co-ordinator.

"Then supposing," said Bropha, "that another people, like the Daya-Bals—who are experts in other branches of robotics—came into possession of such a ship. They could duplicate it eventually?"

"After some fifty years of study, they could," the Co-ordinator agreed. "It wouldn't worry us much since we expect to be studying hard ourselves throughout any given fifty years of history. Actually, of course, we have a theory that our Agents are psychologically incapable of giving away departmental secrets in a manner that could cause us harm."

"I know," said Bropha. "That's why I was surprised to discover that there are . . . or were . . . two other Daya-Bals on Zamm's ship."

For the first time, the Co-ordinator looked a little startled.

"What made you think so?"

"I heard them talking," Bropha said, "on various occasions, though I didn't make out what they said. And finally I saw them—they came past my door, following Zamm." He paused. "I was under drugs at the time," he admitted, "and under treatment generally. But I can assure you that those incidents were not hallucinations."

"I didn't think they were," said the Co-ordinator. "Is that why you're trying to check on Zamm's motivations?"

Bropha hesitated. "It's one of the reasons."

The Co-ordinator nodded. "Fifteen years ago, Zamm lost her husband and child in a space attack

on a Daya-Bal liner. There were three survivors—Zamm was one—but they'd been unconscious through most of the action and could give no description of the attackers. The bodies of most of the other passengers and of the crew were identified, but about fifty remained unaccounted for. Zamm's husband and child were among that number. She believes they were taken along alive by the unknown beings that wrecked and looted the ship."

"That's not so unreasonable!" Bropha said. But he looked rather shaken, suddenly.

"No," agreed the Co-ordinator. "Under the circumstances, though, it's extremely unreasonable of her to expect to find them again. You might say that Zamm is under a delusion in that she believes she will be able to beat probability at such outrageous odds. But that's the extent of her 'insanity'—according to our psychologists."

Bropha started to speak, but then shook his head.

"So it's not too hard to understand that Zamm hates the things she hunts," the Co-ordinator pointed out. "In her eyes, they must be much the same as the things that took her family from her—they might even, by coincidence, be those very things themselves!"

"But that doesn't—" Bropha began again.

"And her delusion appears to have blinded her neither to the difficulties of the task nor to the methods most likely to overcome them," the Co-ordinator continued blandly. "A few years after her loss, she reduced the odds against her at one stroke to the lowest practical level by coming to work for us. In effect, that put the Department of Galactic Zones permanently on the job of helping her in her search! For the past dozen years, any trace of a Daya-Bal any of our operatives has discovered outside of the Betelgeuse Zone has been reported to Zamm in a matter of hours. Now, those two you saw on her ship—can you describe them?"

"It was dark in the passage," Bropha said hesitantly. He was a little pale now. "However, I couldn't be mistaken! It was a man and a boy."

The Co-ordinator was silent for a moment.

"I thought it would be that," he admitted. "Well, it's an unpleasant notion to our way of thinking, I grant you—even a somewhat nightmarish one. There's a flavor of necromancy. However, you can see it's obviously not a matter that involves any question of Zamm's loyalty. As you say, the Daya-Bals are very clever in robotics. And she was a neurosurgeon before she came to us. Those were just two marionettes, Bropha!"

He stood up. "Shall we rejoin your party, now?"

Bropha had come to his feet, too. "And you still say she isn't insane?" he cried.

The Co-ordinator spread his hands. "So far as I can see, your experience offers no contradictory proof. So I shall simply continue to rely on the department's psychologists. You know their verdict: that whatever our Agents may do, their judgment will be almost as nearly infallible as it is possible for highly-trained human-type intelligences to become. And, further, that no matter how widely their motivations may vary, they will not vary ever to the extent of being unacceptable to the department."

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Three days out in space by now, Zone Agent Zamm was rapidly approaching the point at which she had first swerved aside to join the search for Bropha.

She was traveling fast—a great deal faster than she had done while taking her damaged and politically valuable passenger home. With him on board she'd felt obliged to loiter, since the department did not recommend top velocities when some immediate emergency wasn't impending. Only vessels of the truly titanic bulk of Vega's Giant Rangers could navigate with apparent safety at such speeds; while to smaller ships things were likely to happen—resulting usually in sudden and traceless disappearances which had been the subject of much unsatisfactory theorizing in Department Lab and similar scientific centers throughout civilization. But Zamm was impatient both with the numbing, senseless vastness of space and with its less open dangers. Let it snap at her from ambush if it liked! It always missed.

"Want a hot-spot chart on this line I'm following, for a week's cruising range," she informed the

ship's telepath transmitter; and her request was repeated promptly in Galactic Zones Central on the now faraway planet of Jeltad.

Almost as promptly, a three-dimensional star-map swam into view on the transmitter-screen before Zamm. She studied it thoughtfully.

The green dot in the center indicated her position. Visually, it coincided with the fringe of a group of short crimson dashes denoting the estimated present position of the migrating Shaggar ships she had contacted briefly and reported on her run to Jeltad. A cloud of white light far ahead was a civilized star cluster. Here and there within that cluster, and scattered also around the periphery of the chart, some dozens of near-microscopic sun-systems stood circled in lines of deep red. Enclosing the red circles appeared others: orange, purple, green—indicating the more specific nature of the emergency.

Zamm stabbed a pointer at three systems marked thus as focal points of trouble inviting a Zone Agent's attention, near the far left of the chart.

"Going to try to pick up the Shaggar drift again," she announced. "If we find it, we ought to be somewhere up in that area before we're done with them. Get me the particulars on what's wrong around there, and home it out to me. That's all—"

She switched off the transmitter. The star-map vanished and a soft, clear light filled the room. Zamm rubbed a thin, long hand over her forearm and blinked pale eyes at the light. "How about a snack?" she asked.

A food tray slid out of the wall to a side table of the big desk, its containers variously iced or steaming.

She ate slowly and lightly, mentally organizing the period of time ahead. Only for a few weeks—once she had laid out plans for a year or more—so and so many planets to investigate—such and such a field to cover! But the hugeness of the task had gradually overwhelmed her will to major planning. Now she moved about in briefer spurts, not aimlessly but diverted toward new areas constantly by hunches, sudden impulses and hopes—careful only not to retrace her tracks any more than could be avoided.

But she was beaten, she knew. She'd never find them! Neither would any of the thousands and thousands of people she'd set watching and looking for traces of them. The Universe that had taken them was the winner.

She glanced over at the black, cold face that filled the whole of her ship's vision tank, its million glittering eyes mocking her.

"Stupid thing—grinning!" she whispered, hating it tiredly. She got up and started moving restlessly about the big room.

Black Face out there was her enemy! She could hurt it a little, but not much. Not enough to count. It was so big it only had to wait. For centuries; for thousands, for tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of years. Waiting while life built up somewhere, warm and brave and frail and hopeful—then it came suddenly with its flow of cold foulness to end it again! With some ravaging, savage destruction from outside, like the Shaggar; or more subtly with a dark pulse that slowly poisoned the mind of a race. Or it might be even only a single intelligent brain in which the cold death pattern grew till it burst out suddenly to engulf a nation, a planet— There was simply no end to the number and kinds of weapons the Universe had against life!

Zamm had stopped her pacing. She stood looking down at a big couch in the center of the room.

"You shouldn't try mind-search now, Zamm!" The voice of the gigantic robot that was the ship came, almost anxiously, into the room. "You've been under severe emotional tensions throughout the past weeks!"

"I know," she murmured. "Glad they got him back though—nice people; nice guy! We worried him, I think—" She kicked the side of the couch reflectively with the tip of one soft boot. "Those tensions might help, you know! Send the doll out and we'll see."

"The big one?" the voice inquired.

"No!" said Zamm with a sort of terror. "Can't stand to look at him when I'm all alone. No, the little one—"

Somewhere in the ship a door opened and closed. After a few seconds, footsteps came running, lightly, swiftly. A small shape scampered into the room, stopped, glanced about with bright sharp eyes, saw Zamm and ran to her.

She opened her arms and swept up the shape as it flung itself at her laughing.

"What an artist made those masks!" she said wonderingly, her fingertips tracing over a cheek of the face that was very like her own and yet different. "You couldn't tell by just touching—!" She smiled down at the shape cradled in her arms. "Fifteen years! Be a bigger boy now—but not too much. We don't shoot up quick like those old A-Class humans, do we? But for that, we grow up smarter. Don't we?"

The shape chuckled amiable agreement. Zamm blinked at it, half-smiling but alert, as if listening to something within herself. The dolls had very little in common with her working robots; they were designed to be visual hypnotics, compelling and dangerous agents that could permanently distort the fabric of sanity. Those of her people who had helped her in their design had done it reluctantly, though they understood the value of such devices for one who went searching in memory for what she had lost in time. With almost clinical detachment, she watched herself being drawn under the familiar compulsion that seemed to combine past and present, illusion and reality, until something stormy and cold washed suddenly through her face, slackening its features. Then she closed her eyes for a moment, and set the shape carefully back on its feet on the floor.

"Run along, little boy!" she told it absently, her face taut and blank once more. "Back to your place! Mother's busy."

Its gurgle of laughter merged into a receding rush of footsteps. Presently a door clicked shut again, somewhere.

Zamm went slowly to the couch and lay down on it, flat on her back, arms over her head.

"We'll try mind-search now!" she said.

The robot made no comment. A half-score glassy tentacles came out from under the couch and began to fasten themselves here and there over Zamm's body, coiled about her skull and glued flaring tips to her temples.

"I'm set," she said. "Let it go!"

A faint humming rose from the wall. Her body stiffened suddenly, went rigid, and then relaxed completely.

* * *

There had been a brief awareness of cold, rushing inwards from all sides. But almost instantly, it reached and chilled the nerve-linkages at which it was directed.

Incoming sensation ceased with that, abruptly. Zamm's brain swam alone, released, its consciousness diffused momentarily over an infinity of the what-had-been, the time-past—but also over deceptively similar infinities of the might-have-been, the never-was. Those swirling universes of events and symbols would crystallize now, obediently but not necessarily truthfully, into whatever pattern consciousness chose to impress on them.

The brain could fool itself there! But it had an ally who wouldn't be tricked.

It ordered:

"Back to just before it began!"

Swarm after swarm of neurons woke suddenly to the spreading advance of the robot's stimulating, probing forces through their pathways. Million-factored time-past events formed briefly, were discarded and combined anew. At last, familiar images began to flick up and reel away within the brain. Remembered sound crashed; remembered warmth swept in—pain, cold, touch, rest.

Hate, love, terror—possession, loss.

"We're there! Where it began."

There was the darkened cabin on the doomed spaceliner; only a small pool of amber light glowed against one tapestried wall. Distant and faint came the quivering of gigantic engines.

"They hadn't quite worked the shake out of them, those days," Zamm's brain remembered.

She lay on the cabin's big bed, lazing, content, half asleep on her side, blinking at the amber glow. She'd been first to take note of the rest period's arrival and come back to the cabin. As usual.

". . . used to love to sleep, those days!"

Her menfolk were still playing around somewhere in the vacation ship's variously and beautifully equipped playrooms. The big one and the little one—should be getting more rest, both of them! What's a vacation for, otherwise?

Zamm was beginning to wonder idly just where they'd gone to loiter this time, when the amber light flickered twice

"It's begun!"

* * *

Roar of sound, flash of light! Then the blaring attack-alarm from the cabin's communicator was cut short; and a body went flip-flopping crazily about the room like an experimental animal speared by an electric current. Everywhere, the liner's injured artificial gravs were breaking circuits, reforming instantly, breaking at other points; and reforming again. And holding at last, locked into a new, emergency-created pattern.

But in the cabin was darkness and unconsciousness, while over the fifteen years, for the two-thousandth time, Zamm's brain strained and tore for the one look out, the one identifiable sound—perhaps even a touch. A fraction of a second might be all she'd need!

And it had lasted two hours, that period! For two hours, *they* swarmed about the ship they had murdered, looting, despoiling, dragging away the ones still alive and not too badly hurt. They must have come into the cabin more than once, prowled about it, stared at her, touched her. Gone on—

But—nothing.

Full consciousness emerged suddenly at the same point as always. Then the body went crawling and scrambling up the tilted flat of a floor, tilted irrevocably now in the new gravitational pattern the stricken liner had achieved for its rigor mortis. Broken bone in lower right arm, right ankle flapping loosely—like the splintered cabin door overhead, that flapped from what was now one edge of a tilted ceiling! From somewhere within the ship came the steady roar of atomic fires; and then sudden sounds like the yelping of animals, rising into long shrieks.

"The ray-burned ones!" gasped Zamm, as the clambering body stiffened in horror, unmoving, listening. "But those weren't mine!" she screamed. "I checked them all!" She caught herself. "Wait—I'll have to go through that period again."

"You can't do that twice!" the robot's voice said. "Not now. Not that part!"

"Well—" It was right, of course. It usually was. "Get on with the sequence then!"

"Even that's too dangerous. You're nearly exhausted, Zamm!"

But the body reached for the edge of the door, hung on with the good arm, kicked with both legs and wriggled over awkwardly into a bright-lit corridor, slanted upward at a nightmarish angle. Other bodies lay there, in tumbled piles, not moving.

"If I hadn't stopped to check those—If I'd looked up sooner—just a few seconds sooner!"

One by one, the lost seconds passed away as always, and then the body suddenly looked up. A bright glare filled the upper end of the tilted corridor. Something had moved within that glare of light—had just crossed the corridor and was disappearing again down another hallway that angled off it, slanting downwards. The light followed the moving shape like a personal shadow and vanished behind it.

"Working in individual light-barriers, making a last check before they left," murmured Zamm, while the body crawled and hobbled toward the point where the light had been, screaming with terror, rage, question and despair.

"If I'd looked up that moment sooner, I'd have seen what they were like, even in space armor—human or what. I'd have *seen!*"

She found herself staring up at the ceiling of her ship's control room, muttering the worn old words. She stirred stiffly but made no attempt to sit up.

"Nearly went out here," she said tonelessly.

"That was dangerous, Zamm," said the robot-voice. "I warned you."

"No harm done!" she said. "Next time, we'll just work the unconscious period through all by itself."

She lay quiet, her mouth bitter. Somewhere in memory, as somewhere in space, were points where she might pick up their trail. Things she had experienced in those hours but not consciously remembered. Scattered groups of cells within the bony box that enclosed her brain still held them locked.

Statistically, it couldn't happen that she would ever flood any specific group of cells with the impulse-pattern that revived those specific flickers of memory. Statistically, it would be a whole lot easier even to pick the one sun-system and planet where they might be out of the numberless fiery cells that were the galaxy's body!

But she was still learning! One way or the other, she was going to do it. Find them.

Zamm lay there, staring upwards, bitter and unbelieving.

"What is it?" she asked suddenly.

"Company!" the robot said.

* * *

They were a long, long distance away, moving at many times the speed of light. In the vision tank, they seemed to glide past unhurriedly almost within shouting range of the ship. One, two, three, four—

Four clouds of diffused radiance, like great, luminous jellyfish pulsing down an undetectable current of space. Migrating Shaggar ships behind their camouflaging screens. They had spotted her, of course, but like most of the older forms of space life they had learned to be careful about strange ships that did not flee from them at once. They were waiting to see her next move.

"Confirm position and direction of the drift for Central first!" Zamm said. Despair and rage were still bleak in her eyes, but her long, tapered fingers slid swiftly and surely above and about the armament banks of the control desk. Not touching anything just yet; only checking.

"Two of these are nearly in line," the robot reported.

"Five in all!" sniffed Zamm. "One more could make it a fight. Parallel course, and swing round once to make them bunch up—"

A minute or so later, they flashed across the Shaggars' path, at point-blank range ahead of them. The nebular screens vanished suddenly, and five deep-bellied, dark ships became visible instead. Light and energy boiled abruptly all about Zamm's black globe—before, behind. It missed.

"Spot any more, this side?"

"Four more are approaching—barely detectable! They may have been called by this group."

"Good enough! We'll take them next." Zamm waited as the ship completed its swing and drove into line behind her quarry. They were beyond any weapon-reach by then, but space far ahead was being churned into a long whirlpool of flame. At the whirlpool's core, the five Shaggar ships, retreating at speed, had drawn close together and were throwing back everything they had.

"Instructions?" the robot-voice murmured.

"Contact range—Move in!"

Up the long cone of flame, the ship sprang at the five. Zamm's hands soared, spread and high, above the armament banks—thin, curved, white claws of hate! Those seeming to swim down toward her now, turning and shifting slowly within their fire-veils, were not the faceless, more or less humanlike ones she sought. But they were marked with the same red brand: brand of the butchers, looters, despoilers—of all the death-thoughts drifting and writhing through the great stupid carnivore mind of the Universe—

At point-blank range, a spectral brilliance clung and hammered at her ship and fell away. At half-range, the ship shuddered and slowed like a beast plowing through a mudhole and out. At one-quarter, space turned to solid, jarring fire for seconds at a time.

Zamm's hands flashed.

"NOW—"

A power ravened ahead of them then like the bellowing of a sun. Behind it, hardly slower, all defenses cut and every weapon blaring its specific ultimate of destruction, the ship came screaming the hate of Zamm.

* * *

Two years—

The king-shark was bothering Zamm! It hung around some subspace usually where she couldn't hope to trace it.

It was a big ship, fast and smart and tricky. It had weapons and powers of which she knew nothing. She couldn't even guess whether it realized she was on its tail or not. Probably, it didn't.

Its field of operations was wide enough so that its regularly spaced schedule of kills didn't actually disrupt traffic there or scare it away. A certain percentage of losses had to be taken for granted in interstellar commerce. The chief difference seemed to be that in this area the losses all went to the king-shark.

Zamm circled after it, trying to calculate its next points of appearance. A dozen times she didn't miss it by much; but its gutted kills were still all she got.

It took no avoidable chances. It picked its prey and came boiling up into space beside it—or among it, if it was a small convoy—and did its work. It didn't bother with prisoners, so the work was soon done. In an hour everything was over. The dead hulks with their dead crews and dead passengers went drifting away for Zamm to find. The king-shark was gone again.

Disgusted, Zamm gave up trying to outguess it. She went off instead and bought herself a freighter.

The one she selected was an expensive, handsome ship, and she loaded it up with a fortune. She wanted no gilded hook for the king-shark; she'd feed it solid gold! There were a dozen fortunes lying around her globe, in salvaged cash and whatnot from previous jobs. She'd use it up as she needed it or else drop it off at Jeltad the next time she went back. Nobody kept accounts on that sort of stuff.

Her freighter was all ready to start.

"Now I need a nice pirate!" mused Zamm.

She went out and caught herself one. It had an eighteen-man crew, and that was just right for the freighter. She checked over their memories first, looking for the one thing she wanted. It wasn't there. A lot of other things were, but it had been a long time since that kind of investigation made her feel particularly sick.

"Anyone lives through it, I'll let him go!" she promised, cold-eyed. She would, and they knew it. They were small fry; let somebody else grab them up if they wanted them badly enough!

At a good, fast, nervous pace, the freighter and its crew crossed what was currently the most promising section of the king-shark's area—Zamm's black globe sliding and shifting and dancing about its bait at the farthest possible range that would still permit it to pounce.

By and by, the freighter came back on another route and passed through the area again. It was nearing the end of the fourth pass when the king-shark surfaced into space beside it and struck. In that instant, the freighter's crew died; and Zamm pounced.

It wasn't just contact range; it was contact. Alloy hide to alloy hide, Zamm's round black leech clung to the king-shark's flank, their protective screens fused into a single useless mass about them. It didn't matter at what point the leech started to bite; there weren't any weak ones. Nor were there any strong enough to stop its cutter-beam at a four-foot range.

It was only a question of whether they could bring up something in eighty seconds that would blast out the leech's guts as the wall between them vanished.

They couldn't, it seemed. Zamm and her goblin crew of robots went into the king-shark in a glittering wave.

"Just mess up their gravs!" said Zamm. "They don't carry prisoners. There'll be some in suits, but we'll handle them."

* * *

In messed-up rows, the robots laid out the living and the nearly dead about the king-shark's passages and rooms.

"From Cushgar!" said Zamm surprised. "They're prowling a long way from home!"

She knew them by their looks. The ancestors of the king-shark's one hundred and fourteen crewmen had also once breathed the air of Terra. They had gone off elsewhere and mutated variously then; and, like the Daya-Bals, the strongest surviving mutant strains eventually had blended and grown again to be a new race.

Not a handsome one, by Zamm's standards! Short and squat and hairy, and enormously muscled. The spines of their neck and back vertebrae stuck out through their skins in horny spikes, like the ridge on a turtle's shell. But she'd seen worse-looking in the human line; and she wasn't judging a beauty contest.

A robot stalked briskly along the rows like a hunting wasp, pausing to plunge a fine needle into the neck of each of the people from Cushgar, just beneath the fourth vertebral spike. Zamm and a robot that had loafed till now picked out the ones that seemed damaged worst, settled down beside each in turn and began their questioning.

Some time passed—four, five hours—finally six. Then Zamm and her robots came back to her ship. The leech sealed its egress port, unclamped and took off. The king-shark's huge, dark hulk went drifting along through space. There was no one alive on it now. Fifteen minutes later, a light suddenly flared from it, and it vanished.

Zamm sat white-faced and silent at her desk for a much longer time than that.

"The dolls," she said finally, aloud.

"Yes?" said the big robot-voice.

"Destroy them," said Zamm. She reached out and switched on the telepath transmitter. "And get me a line through to Jeltad. The Co-ordinator—"

There was no reply, and no sound came from within the ship. She lit up some star-globes and began calculating from them. The calculations didn't take long. Then she sat still again for a while, staring into the luminous green, slowly swirling haze that filled the transmitter screen.

A shape and a face began forming in it at last; and a voice pronounced her name questioningly.

* * *

"They're in Cushgar!" said Zamm, the words running out in a brittle, tinkling rush. "I know the planet and the place. I saw them the way *it* saw them—the boy's getting pretty big. It's a gray house at a sort of big hospital. Seventeen years they've been working there! Seventeen years, working for them!" Her face was grisly with hate.

The Co-ordinator waited till the words had all run out. He looked rather sick.

"You can't go there alone!" he said.

"How else!" Zamm said surprised. "Who'd be going with me there? But I've got to take the ship. I wanted to tell you."

The Co-ordinator shook his head.

"You bought that ship with your second mission! But you can't go there alone, Zamm. You'll be passing near enough to Jeltad on your way there, anyway. Stop in, and we'll think of something!"

"You can't help me," Zamm told him bluntly. "You can't mission anybody into Cushgar. You lost every Agent you ever sent there. You try a Fleet squadron, and it's war. Thousand Nations would jump you the day after!"

"There's always another way," the Co-ordinator said. He paused a moment, looking for that other way. "You stay near your transmitter anyhow! I'll call you as soon as we can arrange some reasonable method—"

"No," said Zamm. "I can't take any more calls either—I just got off a long run. I'm hitting Deep Rest now till we make the first hostile contact. I've only got one try, and I've got to give it everything. There's no other way," she added, "and there aren't any reasonable methods. I thought it all out. But thanks for the ship!"

* * *

The Co-ordinator located the man called Snoops over a headquarters' communicator and spoke to him briefly.

Snoops swore softly.

"She's got other friends who would want to be told," the Co-ordinator concluded. "I'm leaving that to you."

"You would," said Snoops. "You going to be in your office? I might need some authority!"

"You don't need authority," the Co-ordinator said, "and I just started on a fishing trip. I've had a vacation coming these last eight years—I'm going to take it."

Snoops scowled unpleasantly at the dead communicator. He had no official position in the department. He had a long suite of offices and a laboratory, however. His business was to know everything about everybody, as he usually did.

He scratched his bearded chin and gave the communicator's tabs a few vindictive punches. It clicked back questioningly.

"Want a location check on forty-two thousand and a couple of hundred names!" Snoops said. "Get busy!"

The communicator groaned.

Snoops ignored it. He was stabbing at a telepath transmitter.

"Hi, Ferd!" he said presently.

"Almighty sakes, Snoops," said Ferdinand the Finger. "Don't unload anything new on me now! I'm right in the middle—"

"Zamm's found out about her kin," said Snoops. "They're in Cushgar! She's gone after them."

Zone Agent Ferdinand swore. His lean, nervous fingers worked at the knot of a huge scarlet butterfly cravat. He was a race tout at the moment—a remarkably good one.

"Where'd she contact from?" he inquired.

Snoops told him.

"That's right on my doorstep," said Ferdinand.

"So I called you first," Snoops said. "But you can't contact her. She's traveling Deep Rest."

"Is, huh? What's Bent say?" asked Ferdinand.

"Bent isn't talking—he went fishing. Hold on there!" Snoops added hastily. "I wasn't done!"

"Thanks a lot for calling, Snoops," Ferdinand said with his hand on the transmitter switch. "But I'm right in the middle—"

"You're in the middle of the Agent-list of that cluster," Snoops informed him. "I just unloaded it on you!"

"That'll take me hours!" Ferdinand howled. "You can't—"

"Just parcel it out," Snoops said coldly. "You're the executive type, aren't you? You can do it while you're traveling. I'm busy!"

He cut off Ferdinand the Finger.

"How you coming?" he asked the communicator.

"That's going to be over eighteen thousand to locate!" the communicator grumbled.

"Locate 'em," said Snoops. He was punching the transmitter again. When you want to get in touch with even just the key-group of the Third Department's forty-two thousand and some Zone Agents, you had to keep on punching!

"Hi, Senator!"

* * *

If anyone was amusing himself that week by collecting reports of extraordinary events, with the emphasis on mysterious disappearances, he ran into a richer harvest than usual.

It caused a quite exceptional stir, of course, when Senator Thartwith excused himself in the middle of a press interview, stepped into the next office to take an urgent personal call, and failed to reappear. For the senator was a prominent public figure—the Leader of the Opposition in the Thousand Nations. He had closed the door behind him; but his celebrated sonorous voice was heard raised in apparent expostulation for about a minute thereafter. Then all became still.

Half an hour passed before an investigation was risked. It disclosed, by and by, that the senator had quite vanished!

He stayed vanished for a remarkable length of time. In a welter of dark suspicions, the Thousand Nations edged close to civil war.

Of only planetary interest, though far more spectacular, was the sudden ascension of the Goddess Loppas of Amuth in her chariot drawn by two mystical beasts, just as the conclusion of the Annual Temple Ceremony of Amuth began. A few moments before the event, the Goddess was noted to frown, and her lips appeared to move in a series of brisk, celestial imprecations. Then the chariot shot upwards; and a terrible flash of light was observed in the sky a short while later. Amuth bestrewed its head with ashes and mourned for a month until Loppas reappeared.

Mostly, however, these freakish occurrences involved personalities of no importance and so caused no more than a splash of local disturbance. As when Grandma Wannattel quietly unhitched the rhinocerine pony from her patent-medicine trailer and gave the huge but patient animal to little Grimp to tend—"Until I come back." Nothing would have been made of that incident at all—police and people were always bothering poor Grandma Wannattel and making her move on—if Grimp had not glanced back, just as he got home with the pony, and observed Grandma's big trailer soaring quietly over a hillside and on into the sunset. Little Grimp caught it good for that whopper!

In fact, remarkable as the reports might have seemed to a student of such matters, the visible flow of history was at all affected by only one of them. That was the unfortunate case of Dreem, dread Tyrant of the twenty-two Heebelant Systems:

". . . and me all set to be assassinated by the Freedom Party three nights from now!" roared Dreem. "Take two years to needle the chicken-livered bunch up to it again!"

"Suit yourself, chum!" murmured the transmitter above his bed.

"That I will," the despot grumbled, groping about for his slippers. "You just bet your life I will!"

* * *

"We should be coming within instrument-detection of the van of the ghost fleet almost immediately!" the adjutant of the Metag of Cushgar reported.

"Don't use that term again!" the potentate said coldly. "It's had a very bad effect on morale. If I find it in another official communication, there'll be a few heads lifted from their neck-spines. Call them 'the invaders.'"

The adjutant muttered apologies.

"How many invaders are now estimated in that first group?" the Metag inquired.

"Just a few thousand, sir," the adjutant said. "The reports, of course, remain very—vague! The main body seems to be still about twelve light-years behind. The latest reports indicate approximately thirty thousand there."

The Metag grunted. "We should be just able to intercept that main bunch with the *Glant* then!" he said. "If they keep to their course, that is. It's high time to end this farce!"

"They don't appear to have swerved from their course to avoid interception yet," the adjutant ventured.

"They haven't met the *Glant* yet, either!" the Metag returned, grinning.

He was looking forward to that meeting. His flagship, *Glant*, the spindle-shaped giant-monitor of Cushgar, had blown more than one entire attacking fleet out of space during its eighty years of operation. Its outer defenses weren't to be breached by any known weapon; and its weapons could hash up a planetary system with no particular effort. The *Glant* was invincible.

It was just a trifle slow, though. And these ghost ships, these ridiculous invaders, were moving at an almost incredible pace! He wouldn't be able to get the *Glant* positioned in time to stop the van.

The Metag scowled. If only the reports had been more specific—and less mysteriously terminated! Three times, in the past five days, border fleets had announced they had detected the van of the ghosts and were prepared to intercept. Each time that had been the last announcement received from the fleet in question. Of course, communications *could* become temporarily disrupted, in just that instantaneous, wholesale fashion, by perfectly natural disturbances—but three times!

A slightly chilled breeze tickled the Metag's back-spines for a moment. There was no nonsense about the Metag; but just the same, his conscience—like that of Cushgar generally—was riddled enough to be conducive to occasional superstitious chills.

"There they are, sir!" the adjutant announced suddenly, in an excited quaver.

The Metag stared unbelievably.

* * *

It was as bad as the worst of the reports. It was worse! Secure behind the *Glant's* defenses, the sight of a few thousand hostile cruisers wouldn't have caused him a qualm—

But this!

There *were* a few small war vessels among them—none over six hundred feet long. But, so far as one could tell from their seared, beam-blasted exteriors, most of them had been freighters of every possible size, type and description. There was a sprinkling of dainty, badly slashed yachts and other personal space craft. No wonder they'd been mistaken for the murdered cold hulks of the centuries, swept along in a current of awful new life—!

But the worst of it was that, mixed up with that stream, was stuff which simply didn't belong in space—it should have been gliding sedately over the surface of some planetary sea! Some, by Old Webolt, had *wings!*

And that one, there!

"It's a *house!*" the Metag howled, in horrified recognition. "A thundering, Old-Webolt-damned HOUSE!"

House and all, the battered ghost-horde came flashing up at a pace that couldn't have been matched by Cushgar's newest destroyers. Ponderously and enormously, the *Glant* raced forward in what was, even now, an obviously futile attempt to meet them.

The adjutant was gabbling at his side.

"Sir, we may just be able to reach their flank with the grapnels before they're past!"

"Get them out!" the Metag roared. "Full range! Get them out! We've got to stop one of them—find out! It's a masquerade—"

They didn't quite make it. Near the end of the van, a torpedo-shaped, blackened *thing* seemed to be touched for a moment by a grapnel beam's tip. It was whirled about in a monstrous semicircle, then darted off at a tangent and shot away after the others. They vanished in the direction of Cushgar's heart-cluster.

"*That* was a mistake!" breathed the Metag. "It'll be telling them about us. If the main body deflects its course, we'll never . . . no, wait! There's one more coming—stop it! NOW!"

A slender, three-hundred-foot space yacht flashed headlong into a cluster of the *Glant's* grapnels

and freezers and stopped dead.

"And *now!*" The Metag passed a broad tongue over his trembling lips. "*Now* we'll find out! Bring them in!"

Grappnels and tractors began to maneuver the little yacht in carefully through the intricate maze of passages between the *Glant's* overlapping first, second, and third defense zones. There was nothing wrong with this ghost's looks; it gleamed blue and silver and unblemished in the lights glaring upon it from a hundred different directions. It might have taken off ten minutes before on its maiden flight.

The Great Squid of space had caught itself a shining minnow.

"Sir," the adjutant said uneasily, "mightn't it be better to beam it first?"

The Metag stared at him.

"And kill whoever's inside before we've talked to them?" he inquired carefully. "Have you gone mad? Does that look like a battleship to you—or do you think they *are* ghosts? It's the wildest good luck we caught them. If it hadn't come straight at us, as if it wanted to be caught—"

He paused a moment, scowling out through the screens at the yacht which now hung in a bundle of guide beams just above the *Glant's* yawning intake-port. The minnow was about to be swallowed.

"As if it *wanted* to be caught?" he repeated doubtfully.

It was the last doubt he had.

The little yacht moved.

It moved out of the grappnels and tractors and freezers as if there weren't any! It slid over the monitor's spindle length inside its defenses like a horrible caress. Behind it, the *Glant's* multiple walls folded back in a white-hot, thick-lipped wound. The *Glant* split down its length like a giant clam, opened out and spilled its flaming, exploding guts into space.

The little yacht darted on, unblemished, to resume its outrider position on the ghost-van's flank.

Zone Agent Pagadan of Lar-Sancaya really earned herself a chunk of immortal glory that day! But, unfortunately, no trace of the *Glant* was ever discovered again. And so no one would believe her, though she swore to the truth on a stack of Lar-Sancaya's holiest writings and on seven different lie detectors. Everyone knew what Pagadan could do to a lie detector, and as for the other—

Well, there remained a reasonable doubt.

"What about your contact with the ghosts—the invaders?" Cushgar called to the invincible *Glant*. "Have you stopped them? Destroyed them?"

The *Glant* gave no answer.

Cushgar called the *Glant*. Cushgar called the *Glant*. Cushgar called the *Glant*. Cushgar called the *Glant*—

Cushgar stared, appalled, into its night-sky and listened. Some millions of hostile stars stared back with icy disdain. Not a cry came again from the *Glant*—not a whisper!

The main body of the ghost fleet passed the spot twenty minutes later. It looked hardly damaged at all. In its approximate center was Zone Agent Zamman Tarradang-Pok's black globe, and inside the globe Zamm lay in Deep Rest. Her robot knew its duty—it would arouse her the instant it made hostile contact. It had passed through a third of Cushgar's territory by now, but it hadn't made any as yet.

The main body overtook the eager beavers up front eight hours later and merged with them. Straggled groups came up at intervals from behind and joined. The ghost fleet formed into a single cluster—

A hell-wind blew from the Galaxy's center on Cushgar's heart; and panic rushed before it. The dead were coming: the slaughtered billions, the shattered hulks, the broken defenders—joined now in a monstrous, unstoppable army of judgment that outsped sane thought!

Cushgar panicked—and the good, solid strategy of centuries was lost. Nightmare was plunging at it! Scattered fleet after fleet, ship after ship, it hurled what it could grab up into the path of the ghosts.

Not a cry, not a whisper, came back from the sacrifices!

Then the remaining fleets refused to move.

* * *

Zamm was having a nice dream.

It didn't surprise her particularly. Deep Rest was mostly dreamless; but at some levels it produced remarkably vivid and detailed effects. On more than one occasion they'd even tricked her into thinking they were real!

This time her ship appeared to have docked itself somewhere. The somno-cabin was still darkened, but the rest of it was all lit up. There were a lot of voices.

Zamm zipped up the side of her coverall suit and sat up on the edge of the couch. She listened a moment, and laughed. This one was going to be silly but nice!

"Box cars again!" a woman's voice shouted in the control room as Zamm came down the passage from her cabin. "You crummy, white-whiskered, cheating old—" A round of applause drowned out the last word, or words.

"Lady or no lady," the voice of Senator Thartwith rose in sonorous indignation, "one more such crack and I mow you down!"

The applause went up a few decibels.

"And here's Zamm!" someone yelled.

They were all around her suddenly. Zamm grinned at them, embarrassed. "Glad you found the drinks!" she murmured.

The tall Goddess of Amuth, still flushed from her argument with Zone Agent Thartwith, scooped Zamm up from behind and set her on the edge of a table.

"Where's a glass for Zamm?"

She sipped it slowly, looking them over. There they were, the tricky and tough ones—the assassins and hunters and organizers and spies! The Co-ordinator's space pack, the innermost circle. There he was himself!

"Hi, Bent!" she said, respecting his mission-alias even in a dream. "Hi, Weems! . . . Hi, Ferd!" she nodded around the circle between sips.

Two score of them or more, come into Deep Rest to tell her good-by! She'd bought them all their lives, at one time or another; and they'd bought her hers. But she'd never seen more than three together at any one time in reality. Took a dream to gather them all!

Zamm laughed.

"Nice party!" she smiled. Nice dream. She put down her empty glass.

"That's it!" said the Goddess Loppos. She swung Zamm's feet up on the table, and pulled her around by the shoulders to look at the wall. There was a vision port there, but it was closed.

"What's all this?" Zamm smiled expectantly, lying back in Loppos' arms. What goofy turn would it take now?

The vision port clicked open. Harsh daylight streamed in.

The ship seemed to have set itself down in a sort of hot, sandy park. There was a huge gray building in the background. Zamm gazed at the building, the smile going slowly from her lips. A hospital, wasn't it? Where'd she seen—?

Her eyes darted suddenly to the lower left corner of the port. The edge of another building was visible there—a small house it was, also gray and very close. It would be right beside the ship!

Zamm convulsed.

"No!" she screamed. "It's a dream!"

She was being lifted from the table and put on her feet. Her knees wobbled, then stiffened.

"They're feeling fine, Zamm," the voice of the gray-haired man called Bent was saying. He added: "The boy's got pretty big."

"She'll be all right now," somebody else murmured behind her. "Zamm, you know Deep Rest! We

couldn't take chances with it. We told them they'd have to wait there in the house till you woke."

The ramp beam set her down on the sand of a path. There was hot daylight around her then—seventeen years behind her, and an open door twenty steps ahead.

Her knees began wobbling again.

Zamm couldn't move.

For a score of scores of light-years about, Cushgar the Mighty lay on its face, howling to its gods to save it from the wrath of the ghosts and the wrath of Zamm.

But she—Zone Agent Zamman Tarradang-Pok, conqueror of space, time, and all the laws of probability—she, Free-mind Unqualified of the Free Daya-Bals—Doctor of Neuronics—Vega's grand champion of the Galaxy:

No, she just couldn't move!

Something *put-putted* suddenly by overhead. Enough of its seared and molten exterior remained to indicate that at some earlier stage of its career it might have been a fat, amiable-looking freighter. But there was nothing amiable about its appearance now! It looked like a wreck that had rolled for a century in the fires of hell, and put in another decade or two sunk deep in an acid sea. It looked, in fact, exactly as a ship might expect to look whose pilot had a weakness for withholding his fire till he was well within point-blank range.

But though it had lost its make-up, the ship was otherwise still in extra-good condition! It passed over Zamm's head, bobbed up and down twice in cheerful greeting, and went *putting* off on its secondaries, across the vast hospital and toward the city beyond, dropping a bit as it went, to encourage Cushgar to howl a little louder.

Zamm gazed blankly after the beat-up, impossible warrior, and heard herself laughing. She took a step—and another step.

Why, sure, she could move!

She was running

* * *

". . . so that's how it was," the Third Co-ordinator told Bropha. He swirled the contents of his nearly empty glass around gently, raised it and finished his drink. "All we'd really intended was to hold that dead-straight course, and smash their light interception all the way in. That was to make sure they'd bunch every heavy ship they had on that line, to stop us just before we reached the Cluster.

"Then we were going to pop off at an angle, streak for the place they were keeping Zamm's folks, grab them up and get out of Cushgar again—

"But, of course," he added, "when we discovered they'd all rolled over on their back spikes and were waving their hands in the air, we couldn't resist taking over! You just never know what you start when you go off on an impromptu mission like that!"

He paused and frowned, and sighed. For the Third Co-ordinator was a man of method, who liked to see a job well worked out in advance, with all its angles considered and plenty of allowance made for any unforeseeable developments.

"How about a second drink?" Bropha inquired.

"No," said his friend; "I've got to get back to work. They can squawk all they like"—Bropha realized he was referring to his colleagues of the Council—"but there isn't another Department of the Confederacy that's been jammed up by the Cushgar affair as badly as Galactic Zones is right now! That was forty-two thousand two hundred and thirty-eight individual mission-schedules we had to re-plot!" he said, still somewhat aghast at the completeness of the jam. "Only a third of it's done! And afterwards, I'll have time to worry about finding a replacement for Zamm. There's nothing so scarce as a really good Peripheral Agent! That's all *I* got out of it—"

Bropha looked sympathetic.

"I talked to that boy, and I've got some hopes for him," the Co-ordinator added glumly. "If she keeps her promise, that is, and lets him come to Jeltad, by and by. But he'll never be like Zamm!"

"Give him time," Bropha said consolingly. "They grow up slowly. They're a long-lived race, the Daya-Bals."

"I thought of that, too!" the Co-ordinator nodded. "She'll raise a dozen now before she's done; and among them there might be one, or two— But, by the way she talked, I knew right then Zamm would never let any of the others go beyond fifty light-years of Betelgeuse!"

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