

The Illusionists

The three Bjanta scouts were within an hour's flight of the yellow dwarf star of Ulphi when the *Viper's* needle-shape drove into their detection range, high up but on a course that promised almost to intersect their own.

It didn't exactly come to that point, though the unwary newcomer continued to approach for several minutes more. But then, with an abruptness which implied considerable shock on board at discovering Bjanta ahead, she veered off sharply and shot away at a very respectable speed.

The scout disks swung about unhurriedly, opened out in pursuit formation and were presently closing in again, with leisurely caution, on the fugitive. Everything about that beautifully designed, blue-gleaming yacht suggested the most valuable sort of catch. Some very wealthy individual's plaything it might have been, out of one of the major centers of civilization, though adventuring now far from the beaten path of commercial spaceways. In which case, she would be very competently piloted and crewed and somewhat better armed than the average freighter. Which should make her capable of resisting their combined attack for a maximum of four or five minutes—or, if she preferred energy-devouring top velocity, of keeping ahead of them for even one or two minutes longer than that.

But no Bjanta was ever found guilty of impulsive recklessness. And, just possibly, this yacht could also turn out to be another variation of those hellish engines of destruction which Galactic humanity and its allies had been developing with ever-increasing skill during the past few thousand years, against just such marauders as they.

As it happened, that described the *Viper* exactly. A Vegan G.Z. Agent-Ship, and one of the last fifty or so of her type to be completed, she was, compared with anything else up to five times her three-hundred-foot length, the peak, the top, the absolute culmination of space-splitting sudden death. And, furthermore, she knew it.

"They're maintaining pattern and keeping up with no sign of effort," her electronic brain reported to her pilot. "Should we show them a little more speed?"

"The fifteen percent increase was plenty," the pilot returned in a pleasant soprano voice. Her eyes, the elongated silver eyes and squared black pupils of a Lannai humanoid, studied the Bjantas' positions in the vision tank of the long, wide control desk at which she sat. "If they edge in too far, you can start weaving, but remember they're sensitive little apes! Anything fancy before we get within range of our cruiser is bound to scare them off."

There was silence for a moment. Then the ship's robot voice came into the control room again.

"Pagadan, the disk low in Sector Twelve is almost at contact beaming range. We could take any two of them at any moment now, and save the third for the test run!"

"I know it, little *Viper*," Pagadan said patiently. "But this whole job's based on the assumption that the Bjantas are operating true to form. In that case, the Mother Disk should be somewhere within three light-years behind us, and the cruiser wants to run two of these scouts back far enough to show just where it's lying. We need only the one for ourselves."

Which was something the *Viper* already knew. But it had been designed to be a hunting machine more nearly than anything else, and at times its hunting impulses had to be diverted. Pagadan did that as automatically as she would have checked a similar impulse in her own mind—in effect, whenever she was on board, there was actually no very definite boundary between her own thoughts and those that pulsed through the *Viper*. Often the Lannai would have found it difficult to say immediately whether it was her organic brain or its various electronic extensions in the ship which was attending to some specific bit of business. Just now, as an example, it was the *Viper* who had been watching the communicators.

"The Agent-Trainee on the O-Ship off Ulphi is trying to talk to you, Pagadan," the robot-voice came into the room. "Will you adjust to his range?"

The Lannai's silver-nailed hand shot out and spun a tiny dial on the desk before her. From a communicator to her left a deep voice inquired, a little anxiously:

"Pag? Do you hear me? This is Hallerock. Pag?"

"Go ahead, chum!" she invited. "I was off beam for a moment there. The planet still look all right?"

"No worse than it ever did," said Hallerock. "But this is about your Fleet operation. The six destroyers are spread out behind you in interception positions by now, and the cruiser should be coming into detection dead ahead at any moment. You still want them to communicate with you through the Observation Ship here?"

"Better keep it that way," Pagadan ordered. "The Bjantas might spot Fleet signals, as close to me as they are, but it's a cinch they can't tap *this* beam! I won't slip up again. Anything from the Department?"

"Correlation is sending some new stuff out on the Ulphi business, but nothing important. At any rate, they didn't want to break into your maneuver with the Bjantas. I told them to home it here to the O-Ship. Right?"

"Right," Pagadan approved. "You'll make a Zone Agent yet, my friend! In time."

"I doubt it," Hallerock grunted. "There's no real future in it anyway. Here's the cruiser calling again, Pag! I'll be standing by—"

Pagadan pursed her lips thoughtfully as a barely audible click indicated her aide had gone off communication. She'd been a full-fledged Zone Agent of the Vegan Confederacy for exactly four months now—the first member of any nonhuman race to attain that rank in the super-secretive Department of Galactic Zones. Hallerock, human, was an advanced Trainee. Just how advanced was a question she'd have to decide, and very soon.

The surface reflections vanished from her mind at the *Viper's* sub-vocal warning:

"Cruiser—dead ahead!"

"The disk on your left!" Pagadan snapped. "Cut it off from the others as soon as they begin to turn. Give it a *good* start then—and be sure you're crowding the last bit of speed out of it before you even think of closing in. We may not be able to get what we're after—probably won't—but Lab can use every scrap of information we collect on those babies!"

"We'll get what we're after, too," the *Viper* almost purred. And, a bare instant later:

"They've spotted the cruiser. *Now!*"

* * *

In the vision tank, the fleeing disk grew and grew. During the first few minutes, it had appeared there only as a comet-tailed spark, a dozen radiant streamers of different colors fanning out behind it—not an image of the disk itself but the tank's visual representation of any remote moving object on which the ship's detectors were held. The shifting lengths and brightness of the streamers announced at a glance to those trained to read them the object's distance, direction, comparative and absolute speeds and other matters of interest to a curious observer.

But as the *Viper* began to reduce the headstart the Bjanta had been permitted to get, at the exact rate calculated to incite it to the most intensive efforts to hold that lead, a shadowy outline of the disk's true shape began to grow about the spark. A bare quarter million miles away finally, the disk itself appeared to be moving at a visual range of two hundred yards ahead of the ship, while the spark still flickered its varied information from the center of the image.

Pagadan's hands, meanwhile, played continuously over the control desk's panels, racing the ship's recording instruments through every sequence of descriptive analysis of which they were capable.

"We're still getting nothing really new, I'm afraid," she said at last, matter-of-factly. She had never been within sight of a Bjanta before; but Vega's Department of Galactic Zones had copies of every available record ever made of them, and she had studied the records. The information was largely repetitious and not conclusive enough to have ever permitted a really decisive thrust against the marauders. Bjantas no longer constituted a major threat to civilization, but they had never stopped being a dangerous nuisance along its fringes—space-vermin of a particularly elusive and obnoxious sort.

"They've made no attempt to change direction at all?" she inquired.

"Not since they first broke out of their escape-curve," the *Viper* replied. "Shall I close in now?"

"Might as well, I suppose." Pagadan was still gazing, almost wistfully, into the tank. The disk was tilted slightly sideways, dipping and quivering in the familiar motion-pattern of Bjanta vessels; a faint glimmer of radiation ran and vanished and ran again continuously around its yard-thick edge. The Bjantas were conservatives; the first known recordings made of them in the early centuries of the First Empire had shown space-machines of virtually the same appearance as the one now racing ahead of the *Viper*.

"The cruiser seems satisfied we check with its own line on the Mother Disk," she went on. She sighed, tapping the tank anxiously. "Well, nudge them a bit—and be ready to jump!"

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The *Viper's* nudging was on the emphatic side. A greenish, transparent halo appeared instantly about the disk; a rainbow-hued one flashed into visibility just beyond it immediately after. Then the disk's dual barrier vanished again; and the disk itself veered crazily off its course, flipping over and over like a crippled bat, showing at every turn the deep, white-hot gash the *Viper's* touch had seared across its top.

It was on the fifth turn, some four-tenths of a second later, that it split halfway around its rim. Out of that yawning mouth a few score minute duplicates of itself were spewed into space and flashed away in all directions—individual Bjantas in their equivalent of a combined spacesuit and lifeboat. As they dispersed the stricken scout gaped wider; a blinding glare burst out of it; and the disk had vanished in the traditional Bjanta style of self-destruction when trapped by superior force.

Fast as the reaction had been, the *Viper's* forward surge at full acceleration following her first jabbing beam was barely slower. She stopped close enough to the explosion to feel its radiations activate her own barriers; and even before she stopped, every one of her grappling devices was fully extended and combing space about her.

Within another two seconds, therefore, each of the fleeing Bjantas was caught—and at the instant of contact, all but two had followed the scout into explosive and practically traceless suicide. Those two, however, were wrenched open by paired tractors which gripped and simultaneously twisted as they gripped—an innovation with which the *Viper* had been outfitted for this specific job.

Pagadan, taut and watching, went white and was on her feet with a shriek of inarticulate triumph.

"You *did* it, you sweetheart!" she yelped then. "First ones picked up intact in five hundred years!"

"They're not intact," the *Viper* corrected, less excitedly. "But I have all the pieces, I think!"

"The bodies are hardly damaged," gloated Pagadan, staring into the tank. "It doesn't matter much about the shells. Just bring it all in easy now! The lovely things! Wait till Lab hears we got them."

She hovered around nervously while the flat, brown, soft-shelled—and really not badly dented—bodies of the two Bjantas were being drawn in through one of the *Viper's* locks and deposited gently in a preservative tank, where they floated against the top, their twenty-two angular legs folded up tightly against their undersides. Most of the bunched neural extensions that made them a unit with the mechanisms of their detachable space-shells had been sheared off, of course; but the *Viper* had saved everything.

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"Nice work, Pag!" Hallerock's voice came from the communicator as she returned exultantly to the control room. "No chance of any life being left in those things, I suppose?"

"Not after that treatment!" Pagadan said regretfully. "But I'm really not complaining. You heard me then?"

"I did," acknowledged Hallerock. "Paralyzing sort of war whoop you've got! Want to see the recording the cruiser shot back to me on the Mother Disk? That run just went off, too, as per schedule."

"Put it on!" Pagadan said, curling herself comfortably and happily into her desk chair. "So they found Mommy, eh? Never had such fun before I started slumming around with humans. What were the destructive results?"

"They did all right. An estimated forty-five percent of the scouts right on the strike—and they figure

it will be over eighty before the survivors get out of pursuit range. One of the destroyers and a couple of the cruiser's strike-ships were slightly damaged when the core blew up. Nothing serious."

The visual recording appeared on the communication screen a moment later. It was very brief, as seen from the cruiser—following its hornet-swarm of released strike-ships in on the great, flat, scaly-looking pancake bulk of the Mother Disk, while a trio of destroyers closed down on either side. As a fight, Pagadan decided critically, it was also the worst flop she'd seen in years, considering that the trapped quarry was actually a layered composite of several thousand well-armed scouts! For a brief instant, the barriers of every charging Vegan ship blazed a warning white; then the screen filled momentarily with a rainbow-hued sparkle of scouts scattering under the lethal fire of the attackers—and the brighter flashing of those that failed.

As both darkened out and the hunters swirled off in pursuit of the fugitive swarms, an ellipsoid crystalline core, several hundred yards in diameter, appeared where the Disk had lain in space. The Bjanta breeding center. It seemed to expand slightly.

An instant later, it was a miniature nova.

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Pagadan blinked and nodded approvingly as the screen went blank.

"Tidy habit! Saves us a lot of trouble. But *we* made the only real haul of the day, *Viper*, old girl!" She grimaced. "So now we've still got to worry about that sleepwalking silly little planet of Ulphi, and the one guy on it who isn't . . . isn't sleepwalking, anyway. And a couple of other—" She straightened up suddenly. "Who's that working your communicators now?"

"That's the robot-tracker you put on the Department of Cultures investigator on Ulphi," the *Viper* informed her. "He wants to come in to tell you the lady's got herself into some kind of jam with the population down there. Shall I switch him to the O-Ship and have the Agent-Trainee check and take over, if necessary?"

"Hold it!" Pagadan's hands flew out towards the section of instrument panel controlling the communicators. "Not if it's the D.C. girl! That would mess up all my plans. The tracker's ready and equipped to see nothing happens to her before I get there. Just put that line through to me, fast!"

Some while later, she summoned Hallerock to the O-Ship's communicator.

". . . So I'm picking you up in a few minutes and taking you on board the *Viper*. Central Lab wants a set of structural recordings of these pickled Bjantas right away—and you'll have to do it, because I won't have the time."

"What happened?" her aide inquired, startled.

"Nothing very serious," Pagadan said soothingly. "But it's likely to keep me busy for the next few hours. Our D.C. investigator on Ulphi may have got an accidental whiff of what's rancid on the planet—anyway, somebody's trying to get her under mental control right now! I've got her covered by a tracker, of course, so she's in no real danger; but I'll take the *Viper's* skiff and go on down as soon as I get you on board. By the way, how soon can you have the hospital ship prepared for its job?"

Hallerock hesitated a moment. "I suppose it's ready to start any time. I finished treating the last of the personnel four hours ago."

"Good boy," Pagadan applauded. "I've got something in mind—not sure yet whether it will work. But that attack on the D.C. might make it possible for us to wind up the whole Ulphi operation inside the next twenty-four hours!"

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It had started out, three weeks before, looking like such a nice little mission. Since it was her fifth assignment in four months, and since there had been nothing even remotely nice about any of the others, Pagadan could appreciate that.

Nothing much to do for about three or four weeks now, she'd thought gratefully as she hauled out her skiff for a brief first survey of the planet of Ulphi. She had landed as an ostensible passenger on a Vegan destroyer, the skiff tucked away in one of the destroyer's gun locks, while the *Viper* went on orbit

at a safe distance overhead. That gleaming deep-space machine looked a trifle too impressive to be a suitable vehicle for Pelial, the minor official of Galactic Zones, which was Pagadan's local alias. And as Ulphi's entire population was planet-bound by congenital space-fear, the skiff would provide any required amount of transportation, while serving principally as living quarters and a work-office.

But there would be really nothing to do. Except, of course, to keep a casual eye on the safety of the other Vegans newly arrived on the planet and cooperate with the Fleet in its unhurried preparations to receive the Bjantas, who were due to appear in about a month for the ninth of their series of raids on Ulphi. Those obliging creatures conducted their operations in cycles of such unvarying regularity that it was a pleasure to go to work on them, once you'd detected their traces and could muster superior force to intercept their next return.

On Ulphi Bjantas had been reaping their harvest of life and what they could use of civilization's treasures and tools at periods which lay just a fraction over three standard years apart. It had done no very significant damage as yet, since it had taken eight such raids to frighten the population into revealing its plight by applying for membership in the far-off Confederacy of Vega and the protection that would bring them. The same cosmic clockwork which first set the great Disk on this course would be returning it now, predictably, to the trap Vega had prepared.

Nothing for Pagadan to worry about. Nobody, actually, seemed to have much confidence that the new shell-cracker beams installed on the *Viper* to pick up a couple of Bjantas in an unexploded condition would work as they should, but that problem was Lab's and not hers. And, feeling no doubt that she'd earned a little vacation, they were presenting her meanwhile with these next three weeks on Ulphi. The reports of the officials of other Confederacy government branches who had preceded Pagadan here had described it as a uniquely charming little backwater world of humanity, cut off by the development of planetary space-fear from the major streams of civilization for nearly four hundred years. Left to itself in its amiable climate, Ulphi had flowered gradually into a state of quaint and leisurely prettiness.

So went the reports!

Jauntily, then, Pagadan set forth in her skiff to make an aerial survey of this miniature jewel of civilization and pick out a few of the very best spots for some solid, drowsy loafing.

Two days later, her silver hair curled flat to her skull with outraged shock, she came back on board the *Viper*. The activated telepath transmitter hummed with the ship's full power, as it hurled her wrathful message to G.Z. Headquarters Central on the planet of Jeltad—in Vega's system, eight thousand light-years away.

* * *

At Central on Jeltad, a headquarters clerk, on his way out to lunch, paused presently behind the desk of another. His manner was nervous.

"What's the Pyramid Effect?" he inquired.

"You ought to know," his friend replied. "If you don't, go punch it from Restricted Psych-Library under that heading. I've got a final mission report coming through." He glanced around. "How come the sudden urge for knowledge, Linky?"

Linky jerked a thumb back towards his desk transmitter. "I got that new Lannai Z.A. on just before the end of my stretch. She was blowing her silver top about things in general—had me lining up interviews with everybody from Snoops to the Old Man for her! The Pyramid Effect seems to be part of it."

The other clerk snickered. "She's just diving into a mission then. I had her on a few times while she was in Zonal Training. She'll swear like a Terran till she hits her stride. After that, the rougher things get the sweeter she grows. You want to wait a little? If I get this beam through, I'll turn it over to a recorder and join you for lunch."

"All right." Linky hesitated a moment and then drifted back towards his desk. At a point well outside the vision range of its transmitter screen, he stopped and listened.

" . . . Well, *why* didn't anybody know?" Pagadan's voice came, muted but crackling. "That Department of Cultures investigator has been on Ulphi for over a month now, and others just as long! You get copies of their reports, don't you? You couldn't put any two of them together without seeing that another Telep-Two thinks he's invented the Pyramid Effect out here—there isn't a thing on the crummy little planet that doesn't show it! And I'll be the daughter of a C-Class human," she added bitterly, "if it isn't a type-case in full flower, with all the trimmings! Including immortalization and the Siva Psychosis. No, I do *not* want Lab to home any of their findings out to me! Tell them I'm staying right here on telepath till they've sorted out what I gave them. Where's Snoops, that evil little man? Or can somebody locate that fuddle-headed, skinny, blond clerk I had on a few minutes—"

Linky tiptoed gently back out of hearing.

"She's talking to Correlation now," he reported to his friend. "Not at the sweetness stage yet. I think I'll put in a little time checking the Library at that."

The other clerk nodded without looking up. "You could use the Head's information cabinet. He just went out."

"Pyramid Effect," Psych-Library Information instructed Linky gently a minute later. "Restricted, Galactic Zones. Result of the use of an expanding series of psychimpulse-multipliers, organic or otherwise, by Telepaths of the Orders Two to Four, for the transference of directional patterns, compulsions, illusions, et cetera, to large numbers of subjects.

"The significant feature of the Pyramid Effect is its elimination of excessive drain on the directing mentality, achieved by utilizing the neural or neural-type energies of the multipliers themselves in transferring the directed impulses from one stage to the next.

"Techniques required to establish the first and second stages of multipliers are classified as Undesirable General Knowledge. Though not infrequently developed independently by Telepaths above the primary level, their employment in any form is prohibited throughout the Confederacy of Vega and variously discouraged by responsible governments elsewhere.

"Establishment of the third stage, and subsequent stages, of impulse-multipliers involves a technique-variant rarely developed by uninstructed Telepaths below the Order of Five. It is classified, under all circumstances, as Prohibited General Knowledge and is subject to deletion under the regulations pertaining to that classification.

"Methodology of the Pyramid Effect may be obtained in detail under the heading 'Techniques: Pyramid Effect'—"

The gentle voice subsided.

"Hm-m-m!" said Linky. He glanced about but there was nobody else in immediate range of the information cabinet. He tapped out "Techniques: Pyramid Effect," and punched.

"The information applied for," another voice stated tunelessly, "is restricted to Zone Agent levels and above. Your identification?"

Linky scowled, punched "Cancellation" quickly, murmured "Nuts!" and tapped another set of keys.

"Psychimpulse-multiplier," the gentle voice came back. "Restricted, Galactic Zones. Any person, organic entity, energy form, or mentalized instrument employed in distributing the various types of telepathic impulses to subjects beyond the scope of the directing mentality in range or number—Refer to Pyramid Effect'—"

That seemed to be that. What else was the Z.A. crying about? Oh, yes!

"Siva Psychosis," the gentle voice resumed obligingly. "Symptom of the intermediate to concluding stages of the Autocrat Circuit in human-type mentalities—Refer to 'Multiple Murder: Causes'—"

Linky grimaced.

"Got what you wanted?" The other clerk was standing behind him.

Linky got up. "No," he said. "Let's go anyhow. Your Final Mission came through?"

His friend shook his head.

"The guy got it. Ship and all. The automatic death signals just started coming in. That *bong-bong . . . bong-bong* stuff always gets on my nerves!" He motioned Linky into an elevator ahead of him. "They ought to work out a different sort of signal."

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"Understand you've been having some trouble with Department of Cultures personnel," Snoops told the transmitter genially.

"Just one of them," Pagadan replied, regarding him with disfavor. Probably, he wasn't really evil but he certainly looked it—aged in evil, and wizened with it. Also, he had been, just now, very hard to find. "That particular one," she added, "is worse than any dozen others I've run into, so far!"

"DC-COIF 1227, eh?" Snoops nodded. "Don't have to make up a dossier for you on her. Got it all ready."

"We've had trouble with her before, then?"

"Oh, sure! Lots of times. System Chief Jasse—beautiful big thing, isn't she?" Snoops chuckled. "I've got any number of three-dimensionals of her."

"You would have," said Pagadan sourly. "For a flagpole, she's not so bad looking, at that. Must be eight feet if she's an inch!"

"Eight foot two," Snoops corrected. "What's she up to now, that place you're at—Ulphi?"

"Minding other people's business like any D.C. Mostly mine, though she doesn't know that. I'm objecting particularly to her practice of pestering the Fleet for information they either don't have or aren't allowed to give for reasons of plain standard operational security. There's a destroyer commander stationed here who says every time she looks at him now, he gets a feeling he'd better watch his step or he'll get turned over and whacked."

"She wouldn't do that," Snoops said earnestly. "She's a good girl, that Jasse. Terribly conscientious, that's all. You want that dossier homed out to you or right now, vocally?"

"Both. Right now I want mostly background stuff, so I'll know how to work her. I'd psycho it out of her myself, but she's using a pretty good mind-shield and I can't spend too much mission-time on the Department of Cultures."

Snoops nodded, cleared his throat, rolled his eyes up reflectively, closed them and began.

"Age twenty-five, or near enough to make no difference. Type A-Class Human, unknown racial variant. Citizen of the Confederacy; home-planet Jeltad. Birthplace unknown—parentage, ditto; presumably spacer stock."

"Details on that!" interrupted Pagadan.

He'd intended to, Snoops said, looking patient.

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Subject, at about the age of three, had been picked up in space, literally, and in a rather improbable section—high in the northern latitudes where the suns thinned out into the figurative Rim. A Vegan scout, pausing to inspect an area littered with the battle-torn wreckage of four ships, found her drifting about there unconscious and half-alive, in a spacesuit designed for a very tall adult—the kind of adult she eventually became.

Investigation indicated she was the only survivor of what must have been an almost insanely savage and probably very brief engagement. There was some messy evidence that one of the ships had been crewed by either five or six of her kind. The other three had been manned by Lartessians, a branch of human space marauders with whom Vega's patrol forces were more familiar than they particularly wanted to be.

So was Pagadan. "They fight just like that, the crazy apes! And they're no slouches—our little pet's people must be a rugged lot to break even with them at three-to-one odds. But we've got no record at all of that breed?"

He'd checked pretty closely but without results, Snoops shrugged. And so, naturally enough, had Jasse herself later on. She'd grown up in the family of the scout's second pilot. They were earnest

Traditionalists, so it wasn't surprising that at sixteen she entered the Traditionalist College on Jeltad. She was a brilliant student and a spectacular athlete—twice a winner in Vega's System Games.

"Doing what?" inquired Pagadan curiously.

Javelin, and one of those swimming events; Snoops wasn't sure just which— She still attended the College intermittently; but at nineteen she'd started to work as a field investigator for the Department of Cultures. Which wasn't surprising either, since Cultures was practically the political extension of the powerful Traditionalist Creed—

They had made her a System Chief only three years later.

"About that time," Snoops concluded, "was when we started having trouble with Jasse. She's smart enough to suspect that whatever Galactic Zones is doing doesn't jibe entirely with our official purpose in life." He looked mildly amused. "Seems to think we might be some kind of secret police—you know how Traditionalists feel about anything like *that!*"

Pagadan nodded. "Everything open and aboveboard. They mean well, bless them!"

She went silent then, reflecting; while the alien black-and-silver eyes continued to look at Snoops, or through him possibly, at something else.

He heard himself saying uneasily, "You're not going to do her any harm, Zone Agent?"

"Now why should I be doing System Chief Jasse any harm?" Pagadan inquired, much too innocently. "A good girl, like you say. And so lovely looking, too—in spite of that eight-foot altitude."

"Eight foot two," Snoops corrected mechanically. He didn't feel at all reassured.

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The assistant to the Chief of G.Z. Office of Correlation entered the room to which his superior had summoned him and found the general gazing pensively upon a freshly assembled illumined case-chart.

The assistant glanced at the chart number and shrugged sympathetically.

"I understand she wants to speak to you personally," he remarked. "Is it as bad as she indicates?"

"Colonel Dubois," the general said, without turning his head, "I'm glad you're here. Yes, it's just about as bad!" He nodded at the upper right region of the chart where a massed group of symbols flickered uncertainly. "That's the bulk of the information we got from the Zone Agent concerning the planet of Ulphi just now. Most of the rest of it has been available to this office for weeks."

Both men studied the chart silently for a moment.

"It's a mess, certainly," the colonel admitted then. "But I'm sure the Agent understands that, when an emergency is not indicated in advance, all incoming information is necessarily handled here in a routine manner, which frequently involves a considerable time-lag in correlation."

"No doubt she does," agreed the general. "However, we keep running into her socially when she's around the System, my wife and I. Particularly my wife. You understand that I should like our summation of this case to be as nearly perfect as we can make it?"

"I understand, sir."

"I'm going to read it," the general sighed. "I want you to check me closely. If you're doubtful on any point of interpretation at all, kindly interrupt me at once."

They bent over the chart together.

"The over-all pattern on Ulphi," the general stated, "is obviously that produced by an immortalized A-Class human intellect, Sub-Class Twelve, variant Telep-Two—as developed in planetary or small-system isolation, over a period of between three and five centuries."

He'd lapsed promptly, Colonel Dubois noted with a trace of amusement, into a lecturer's tone and style. Being one of the two men primarily responsible for devising the psychomathematics of correlation and making it understandable to others, the general had found plenty of opportunity to acquire such mannerisms.

"In that time," he went on, "the system of general controls has, of course, become almost completely automatic. There is, however, continuing and fairly intensive activity on the part of the directing mentality.

Development of the Siva Psychosis is at a phase typical for the elapsed period—concealed and formalized killings cloaked in sacrificial symbolism. Quantitatively, they have not begun as yet to affect the population level. The open and indiscriminate slaughter preceding the sudden final decline presumably would not appear, then, for at least another century.

"Of primary significance for the identification of the controlling mentality is this central grouping of formulae. Within the historical period which must have seen the early stages of the mentality's dominance, the science of Ulphi—then practically at Galactic par—was channeled for thirty-eight years into a research connected with the various problems of personal organic immortality. Obviously, under such conditions, only the wildest sort of bad luck could prevent discovery and co-ordination of the three basic requirements for any of the forms of individual perpetuation presently developed.

"We note, however, that within the next two years the investigation became completely discredited, was dropped and has not been resumed since.

"The critical date, finally, corresponds roughly to the announced death of the planet's outstanding psychic leader of the time—an historical figure even on present-day Ulphi, known as Moyuscane the Immortal Illusionist.

"Corroborative evidence—"

The reading took some fifteen minutes in all.

"Well, that's it, I think," the general remarked at last. "How the old explorers used to wonder at the frequency with which such little lost side-branches of civilization appeared to have simply and suddenly ceased to exist!"

He became aware of the colonel's sidelong glance.

"You agree with my interpretation, colonel?"

"Entirely, sir."

The general hesitated. "The population on Ulphi hasn't been too badly debased as yet," he pointed out. "Various reports indicate an I.Q. average of around eleven points below A-Class—not too bad, considering the early elimination of the strains least acceptable to the controlling mentality, and the stultifying effect of life-long general compulsions on the others.

"They're still eligible for limited membership—capable of self-government and, with help, of self-defense. It will be almost a century, of course, before they grow back to a point where they can be of any real use to us. Meanwhile, the location of the planet itself presents certain strategic advantages—"

He paused again. "I'm afraid, colonel," he admitted, "that I'm evading the issue! The fact remains that a case of this kind simply does not permit of solution by this office. The identification of Moyuscane the Immortal as the controlling mentality is safe enough, of course. Beyond that we cannot take the responsibility for anything but the most general kind of recommendation. But now, colonel—since I'm an old man, a cowardly old man who really hates an argument—I'm going on vacation for the next hour or so.

"Would you kindly confront the Zone Agent with our findings? I understand she is still waiting on telepath for them."

* * *

Zone Agent Pagadan, however, received the information with a degree of good nature which Colonel Dubois found almost disquieting.

"Well, if you can't, you can't," she shrugged. "I rather expected it. The difficulty is to identify our Telep-Two physically without arousing his suspicions? And the danger is that no one knows how to block things like a planet-wide wave of suicidal impulses, if he happens to realize that's a good method of self-defense?"

"That's about it," acknowledged the colonel. "It's very easy to startle mentalities of his class into some unpredictable aggressive reaction. That makes it a simple matter to flush them into sight, which helps to keep them from becoming more than a temporary nuisance, except in such unsophisticated surroundings as on Ulphi. But in the situation that exists there—when the mentality has established itself

and set up a widespread system of controls—it does demand the most cautious handling on the part of an operator. This particular case is now further aggravated by the various psychotic disturbances of Immortalization."

Pagadan nodded. "You're suggesting, I suppose, that the whole affair should be turned over to Interstellar Crime for space-scooping or some careful sort of long-range detection like that?"

"It's the method most generally adopted," the colonel said. "Very slow, of course—I recall a somewhat similar case which took thirty-two years to solve. But once the directing mentality has been physically identified without becoming aware of the fact, it can be destroyed safely enough."

"I can't quite believe in the necessity of leaving Moyuscane in control of that sad little planet of his for another thirty-two years, or anything like it," the Lannai said slowly. "I imagine he'll be willing to put up with our presence until the Bjanta raids have been deflected?"

"That seems to be correct. If you decide to dig him out yourself, you have about eight weeks to do it. If the Bjantas haven't returned to Ulphi by then, he'll understand that they've either quit coming of their own accord, as they sometimes do—or that they've been chased off secretly. And he could hardly help hitting on the reason for that! In either case, the Senate of Ulphi will simply withdraw its application for membership in the Confederacy. It's no secret that we're too completely tied up in treaties of nonintervention to do anything but pull our officials out again, if that's what they want."

"The old boy has it all figured out, hasn't he?" Pagadan paused. "Well—we'll see. Incidentally, I notice your summation incorporated Lab's report on the space-fear compulsion Moyuscane's clamped on Ulphi. Do you have that with you in detail—Lab's report, I mean? I'd like to hear it."

"It's here, yes—" A muted alto voice addressed Pagadan a moment later:

"In fourteen percent of the neuroplates submitted with the Agent's report, space-fear traces were found to extend into the subanalytical levels normally involved in this psychosis. In all others, the symptoms of the psychosis were readily identifiable as an artificially induced compulsion.

"Such a compulsion would maintain itself under reality-stresses to the point required to initiate space-fear death in the organism but would yield normally to standard treatment."

"Good enough," Pagadan nodded. "Fourteen percent space-fear susceptibility is about normal for that type of planetary population, isn't it? But what about Moyuscane himself? Is there anything to show, anywhere, that he suffered from the genuine brand of the psychosis—that he is one of that fourteen percent?"

"Well—yes, there is!" Colonel Dubois looked a little startled. "That wasn't mentioned, was it? Actually, it shows up quite clearly in the historical note that none of his reported illusion performances had any but planetary backgrounds, and usually interior ones, at that. It's an exceptional Illusionist, you know, who won't play around with deep-space effects in every conceivable variation. But Moyuscane never touched them—"

* * *

"Telepath is now cleared for Zone Agent 131.71," the Third Co-ordinator of the Vegan Confederacy murmured into the transmitter before him.

Alone in his office as usual, he settled back into his chair to relax for the few seconds the visualization tank would require to pick up and re-structure Zone Agent Pagadan's personal beam for him.

The office of the Chief of Galactic Zones was as spacious as the control room of a first-line battleship, and quite as compactly equipped with strange and wonderful gadgetry. As the master cell of one of the half dozen or so directing nerve-centers of Confederacy government, it needed it all. The Third Co-ordinator was one of Jeltad's busier citizens, and it was generally understood that no one intruded on his time except for some extremely good and sufficient reason.

However, he was undisturbed by the reflection that there was no obvious reason of any kind for Zone Agent Pagadan's request for an interview. The Lannai was one of the Third Co-ordinator's unofficial group of special Agents, his trouble-shooters de luxe, whom he could and regularly did unleash

in the pits of space against virtually any kind of opponent—with a reasonable expectation of being informed presently of the Agent's survival and success. And whenever one of that fast-moving pack demanded his attention, he took it for granted they had a reason and that it was valid enough. Frequently, though not always, they would let him know then what it was.

The transmitter's visualization tank cleared suddenly from a smokily glowing green into a three-dimensional view of the *Viper's* control room; and the Co-ordinator gazed with approval on the silver-eyed, spacesuited, slender figure beyond the ship's massive control desk. Human or not, Pagadan was nice to look at.

"And what do you want now?" he inquired.

"Agent-Trainee Hallerock," the Lannai informed him, "6972.41, fourth year."

"Hm-m-m. Yes, I know *him!*" The Co-ordinator tapped the side of his long jaw reflectively.

"Rather striking chap, isn't he?"

"He's beautiful!" Pagadan agreed enthusiastically. "How soon can you get him out here?"

"Even by Ranger," the Co-ordinator said doubtfully, "it would be ten days. There's an Agent in the nearest cluster I could route out to you in just under four."

She shook her head. "Hallerock's the boy—gloomy Hallerock. I met him a few months ago, back on Jeltad," she added, as if that made it clear. "What are his present estimated chances for graduation?"

The inquiry was strictly counter-regulation, but the Co-ordinator did not raise an eyebrow. He nudged a switch on his desk.

"I'll let the psych-tester answer that."

"If the Agent-Trainee were admitted for graduation," a deep mechanical voice came immediately from the wall to his left, "the percentage of probability of his passing all formal tests would be ninety-eight point seven. But because of a background conditioned lack of emotional adjustment to Vegan civilization, graduation has been indefinitely postponed."

"What I thought," Pagadan nodded. "Well, just shoot him out to me then—by Ranger, please!—and I'll do him some good. That's all, and thanks a lot for the interview!"

"It was a pleasure," said the Co-ordinator. Then, seeing her hand move towards her transmitter switch, he added hastily, "I understand you've run into a secondary mission problem out there, and that Correlation foresees difficulties in finding a satisfactory solution."

The Lannai paused, her hand on the switch. She looked a little surprised. "That Ulphian illusionist? Shouldn't be too much trouble. If you're in a hurry for results though, please get behind Lab Supply on the stuff I requisitioned just now—the Hospital ship, the Kynoleen and the special types of medics I need. Push out that, and Hallerock, to me and you'll have my final mission report in three weeks, more or less."

She waved a cheerful farewell and switched off, and the view of the *Viper's* control room vanished from the transmitter.

* * *

The Co-ordinator chewed his upper lip thoughtfully.

"Psych-tester," he said then, "just what is the little hellcat cooking up now?"

"I must remind you," the psych-tester's voice returned, "that Zone Agent 131.71 is one of the thirty-two individuals who have been able to discern my primary purpose here, and who have established temporary blocks against my investigations. She is, furthermore, the first to have established a block so nearly complete that I can offer no significant answer to your question. With that understood, do you wish an estimate?"

"No!" grunted the Co-ordinator. "I'd forgotten. I can make a few wild guesses myself." He ran his hand gently through his graying hair. "Let's see—this Hallerock's trouble is a background conditioned lack of adjustment to our type of civilization, you say?"

"He comes," the psych-tester reminded him, "of the highly clannish and emotionally planet-bound strain of Mark Wieri VI."

The Co-ordinator nodded. "I remember now. Twenty-two thousand light-years out. They've been isolated there almost since the First Stellar Migrations—were rediscovered only a dozen years or so ago. Extra good people! But Hallerock was the only one of them we could talk into going to work for us."

"He appears to be unique among them in being galactic-minded in the Vegan sense," the psych-tester agreed. "Subconsciously, however, he remains so strongly drawn to his own kind that a satisfactory adjustment to permanent separation from them has not been achieved. Outwardly, the fact is expressed only in a lack of confidence in himself and in those with whom he happens to be engaged in any significant work; but the tendency is so pronounced that it has been considered unsafe to release him for Zonal duty."

"Ninety-eight point seven!" the Co-ordinator said. He swore mildly. "That means he's way the best of the current batch—and I could use a couple like that so beautifully right now! Psychoing won't do it?"

"Nothing short of complete mind-control for a period of several weeks."

The Co-ordinator shook his head. "It would settle his personal difficulties, but he'd be spoiled for us." He considered again, briefly, sighed and decided: "Pagadan's claimed him, anyway. She may wreck him completely; but she knows her therapy at that. Better let her give it a try."

He added, as if in apology:

"I'm sure that if we could consult Trainee Hallerock on the question, he'd agree with us—"

He was reaching out to punch down a desk stud with the last words and continued without a noticeable break:

"Central Communicator clear for Lab report on the rate of spread of the Olleeka plagues—"

His mind clearing also with that of any other matter, he settled back quietly and waited for Lab to come in.

* * *

System Chief Jasse, D.C. Cultural Field Investigator, listened attentively till her study recorder had clicked out "Report Dispatched." Then she sat frowning at the gadget for a moment.

The home office would like that report! A brisk, competent review of a hitherto obscure section of Ulphi's long-past rough and ready colonial period, pointing out and explaining the contrast between those days and the present quaintly perfect Ulphian civilization. It was strictly in line with the Department of Cultures' view of what any group of A-Class human beings, left to themselves, could achieve and it had sounded plausible enough when she played it back. But somehow it left her dissatisfied. Somehow Ulphi itself left her dissatisfied.

Perhaps she just needed a vacation! As usual, when a new case was keeping her busy, she had been dosing herself with insomniates for the past two weeks. But in her six years of work with Cultures she had never felt the need for a vacation before.

Patting back a yawn in the process of formation, Jasse shook her head, shut off the recorder and stepped out before the study mirror. Almost time for another appointment—some more historical research.

Turning once slowly before the tall mirror, she checked the details of her uniform and its accessories—the Traditionalist Greens which had been taken over with all their symbolic implications by the Department of Cultures. Everything in order, including the concealed gravmoc batteries in belt and boots and the electronic mind-shield switch in her wrist bracelet. No weapons to check; as a matter of policy they weren't carried by D.C. officials.

She pulled a bejeweled cap down on her shoulder-length wave of glossy black hair, grimaced at the face that, at twenty-five or thereabouts, still wore an habitual expression of intent, childish seriousness, and left the study.

By the lake shore, fifty feet from the D.C. mobile-unit's door, the little-people were waiting. Six of them today—middle-aged historians in the long silver-gray garments of their guild, standing beside a beautifully shaped vehicle with a suggestion of breath-taking speed about its lines. The suggestion didn't fool Jasse, who knew by experience that its looks were the only breath-taking thing about an Ulphian

flow-car. The best it would produce in action was an air-borne amble, at so leisurely a pace that throughout her first trip in one of the things she had felt like getting out and pushing.

One mustn't, of course, she reminded herself conscientiously, settling back in the flow-car, judge any human culture by the achievements of another! Granted that Ulphi had long since lost the driving power of Vega's humming technologies, who was to say that it hadn't found a better thing in its place?

A fair enough question, but Jasse doubtfully continued to weigh the answer while the lengthy little Ulphian ritual of greetings and expressions of mutual esteem ran its course and came to an end in the flow-car. Then her escort of historical specialists settled down to shop talk in their flowery derivative of one of the twelve basic human dialects, and she began automatically to contribute her visiting dignitary's share to the conversation—just enough to show she was deeply interested but no more. Her attention, however, remained on the city below.

They were gliding only five hundred feet above the lake's shoreline, but all roofs were low enough to permit a wide view—and everything, everywhere, was in superbly perfect symmetry and balance. The car's motion did not change that impression. As it drove on, the gleaming white and softly tinted buildings about and below it flowed steadily into new and always immaculate patterns of sweeping line and blended color, merging in and out of the lake front with a rightness that trembled and stopped at the exact point of becoming too much so.

And that was only a direct visual expression of the essence of Ulphi's culture. Every social aspect of the planet showed the same easy order, the same minute perfectionist precision of graceful living—achieved without apparent effort in cycle on cycle of detail.

Jasse smiled pleasantly at her companions. The puzzling fact remained that this planetary batch of little-people just wasn't particularly bright! And any population with the gumption of a flock of rabbits should have sent a marauding Mother Disk of Bjantas on its way in a panicky hurry, without having to ask for help to solve *that* sort of problem!

She really must need a vacation, Jasse sighed, disturbed by such unorthodox reflections. A-Class humans just didn't go off on the wrong track, however gracefully, unless they were pushed there—so her doubts about Ulphi meant simply that she hadn't found the key to it yet.

Possibly she could do with a few weeks of re-indoctrination in basic Traditionalism.

* * *

"The Tomb of Moyuscane the Immortal—the last of our Great Illusionists!"

Jasse regarded the tomb with an air of respectful appreciation. Tombs, on the whole, she could do without; but this one undoubtedly was something special. She and Requada-Attan, Historian and Hereditary Custodian of the Tomb, had come together out of one of the main halls of the enormous building complex which housed the Historical Institute of Ulphi's Central City into a small, transparently over-roofed park. The remainder of her escort had shown her what they had to show and then withdrawn respectfully to their various duties; but Requada-Attan, probably not averse to having a wider audience benefit by the informative lecture he was giving the distinguished visitor, had left the gate to the park open behind them. A small crowd of sightseeing Ulphians had drifted in and was grouped about them by now.

"A fitting resting place for the Immortal One!" Jasse commented piously.

That brought a murmur of general appreciation from the local citizens. She suspected wryly that she, with her towering height and functional Vegan uniform, was the real center of interest in this colorfully robed group of little-people—few of them came up to a point much above the level of her elbows. But otherwise, the Tomb of Moyuscane must seem well worth a visit to a people as culturally self-centered as the Ulphians. Set against the rather conventional background of a green grove and whispering fountains, it was a translucently white monument, combining stateliness and exquisite grace with the early sweeping style which the last four centuries had preserved and expanded over the planet.

"The common people have many interesting superstitions about the Tomb," Requada-Attan confided loudly. "They say that Moyuscane's illusions are still to be seen within this park occasionally.

Especially at night."

His round, pink face smiled wisely up at her. It was obvious that he, a historical scientist, did not share such superstitions.

Illusion performances, Jasse thought, nodding. She'd seen a few of those of a minor sort herself, but the records indicated that some centuries ago on Ulphi they had been cultivated to an extent which no major civilization would tolerate nowadays. The Illusionists of Ulphi had been priest-entertainers and political leaders; their mental symphonies—final culmination and monstrous flowering of all the tribal dances and varied body-and-mind shaking communal frenzies of history—had swayed the thinking and the emotional life of the planetary race. And Moyuscane the Immortal had wound up that line of psychic near-rulers as the greatest of them all.

It was rather fascinating at that, she decided, to go adventuring mentally back over the centuries into the realm of a human power which, without word or gesture, could sweep up and blend the emotions of thousands of other human beings into a single mighty current that flowed and ebbed and thundered at the impulses of one will through the channels its imagination projected.

Fascinating—but a little disturbing, too!

"I think—" she began, and stopped.

* * *

Words and phrases which had been no previous part of her thoughts suddenly were floating up in her mind—and now, quite without her volition, she was beginning to utter them!

"But that explains it!" her voice was saying, with a note of pleased, friendly surprise. "I've been wondering about you, Requada-Attan, you and your mysterious, beautiful world! I should have known all along that it was simply the dream-creation of an artist—that one of your Great Illusionists was still alive—"

The last words seemed to drop one by one into a curiously leaden silence, and then they stopped. Jasse was still only completely, incredulously astonished. Then something began to stir in that heavy silence about her; and her head came sharply around.

It was their faces that warned her—once before, she'd seen the expression of a mob that was acting under mental compulsion; and so she knew at once and exactly what she'd have to do next. Not stop to figure out what had happened, or try to reason with them, argue, threaten, or waste time yelling for help. Just get out of the immediate neighborhood, fast!

There weren't, of course, really enough Ulphians around to be called a mob—hardly more than twenty adults in all. That they had been directed against her was obvious enough, in the eyes that saw only her now, and in the synchronized motion with which they were converging quietly on the spot where she stood.

They stopped moving as if at a command Jasse could not hear, as she swung about, unconsciously with a very similar quietness, to face them.

Requada-Attan was under it, too! He still stood nearest her, about four steps to her left. Straight ahead, between Jasse and the gate, was the next closest group: two husky-looking young men with the shaved heads and yellow robes of professionals from the School of Athletes; and immediately behind them another silver-robed historian whom she had noticed previously—an elderly man, very thin and tall. No weapons in sight anywhere—

The three ahead were the ones to pass then! Jasse took two quick steps in their direction; and gravel scattered instantly under their sandaled feet, as they came to meet her in a rush. All about was the same sudden noise and swirl of motion.

But it was Requada-Attan who reached her first, with a quickness she hadn't counted on in a man of his plump build. Abruptly his weight was dragging at her arm, both hands gripped about her wrist, and jerking sideways to throw her off balance. Jasse twisted free sharply—that wrist carried her mind-shield bracelet and had to be guarded!—hauled the Hereditary Custodian off his feet with her right hand, sent him rolling before the knees of the charging yellow-robos.

They went down in a satisfactorily sprawling confusion, the thin historian turning a complete clumsy somersault with flapping garments across them a moment later. But the others had arrived by then, and Jasse became temporarily the center of a clawing, grappling, hard-breathing but voiceless cluster of humanity. What sent the first shock of real fright through her was that most of them seemed to be trying to get at her shield-bracelet! Because that indicated a mental attack was impending—mental attacks and mass compulsions on present-day Ulphi!

* * *

The jolt of that realization—the implication that hidden powers had been roused into action against her on this innocuous-looking world—might have resulted in a rash of snapping necks and other fatal incidents all around Jasse. Though Cultures frowned on weapons for its officials, the ancient Terran Art of the Holds was highly regarded among Traditionalists everywhere and had been developed by them to a polished new perfection. But she hauled herself back promptly from the verge of slipping into that well-drilled routine, which she never yet had put to its devastating practical use. The situation, so far, certainly wasn't as bad as all that—if she just kept her head! Slapping, shoving, shaking and turning, she twisted her way through this temporarily demented group of little-people, intent primarily on staying on her feet and keeping her left wrist out of reach.

Then the yellow-robed athletes were up again, and Jasse bumped the two shaven heads together with measured violence, stepped with great caution across an overturned but viciously kicking little boy—found herself suddenly free, and tripped up the last of the lot to come plunging in, a youngish, heavy-set woman.

The brief and practically bloodless melee had circled to within a dozen strides of the gateway of the park. She darted through it, slammed the high bronze gate behind her, saw Requada-Attan's key still in the lock and had her assailants shut in an instant later.

She could spare a moment then to look back at them. Most of them were still on the ground or clambering awkwardly to their feet. With one exception, all stared after her with those chillingly focused and expressionless eyes. The exception was a white-robed, dark-skinned man of middle age with a neatly trimmed fringe of brown beard around his chin, who stood on a tiled walk a little apart from the others. He was watching them, and Jasse could not recall having noticed him before.

Then their eyes met for an instant as she was turning away, and there was conscious intelligence in his look, mingled with something that might have been fright or anger.

At least, she thought, loping worriedly down one of the corridors towards the main halls of the Institute from which she had come, she wasn't the only one who had got a surprise out of the affair! She would have time to think about that later. The immediate problem was how to get out of this mess, and it would be stupid to assume that she had succeeded in that.

There were plenty of other people in those buildings ahead, and she had no way at all of knowing what their attitude would be.

* * *

She came with swift caution out of the corridor, into a long, sunbright and apparently deserted hall.

The opposite wall was formed of vertical blue slabs of some marble-like mineral with wide window embrasures between. The tops of feathery trees and the upper parts of buildings, a good distance off, were visible beyond the windows. Several hundred feet away in either direction a high doorway led out of the hall.

Both exits were blocked just now by a wedged, immobile mass of little-people. Robes of all colors—citizens of all types and classes, hastily assembled to stop her again. Even at this distance their faces sickened her. Apparently they had been directed simply to prevent her from leaving this hall, until—

It clamped down then about her skull—and tightened!

Mental attack!

Jasse's hands leaped to her temples in a convulsive, involuntary motion, though she knew there was nothing tangible there to seize. It was inside her, an enormous massing of tiny, hard pressures which were

not quite pain, driving upon an equal number of critical linkages within her brain. In her first flash of panicky reaction, it seemed the burst of an overwhelming, irresistible force. A moment later, she realized it was quite bearable.

She should have known, of course with her mind-shield activated as it was, it would take some while before that sort of thing could have much effect. The only immediately dangerous part of it was that it cut down the time she could afford to spend on conducting her escape.

She glanced again at the nearer of the two doorways, and knew instantly she wasn't even going to consider fighting her way through another mindless welter of grappling human bodies like that! The nearest window was a dozen steps away.

A full hundred yards beneath her, the building's walls dropped sheer into a big, blue-paved courtyard, with a high-walled park on the opposite side and open to the left on a city street, a block or more away. The street carried a multicolored, murmuring stream of traffic, too far off to make any immediate difference. A few brightly dressed people were walking across the courtyard below—they made no difference either. The important thing was the row of flow-cars parked against the wall down there, hardly eighty feet to her right.

Her hand dropped to her belt and adjusted the gravmoc unit. She felt almost weightless as she swung over the sill and pushed away from the building; but she touched the pavement in something less than eighteen seconds, rolled over twice and came up running.

There was scattered shouting then. Two young women, about to step out of one of the cars, stared in open-mouthed surprise as she came towards them. But neither they nor anyone else made any attempt to check her departure.

She had one of the vehicles airborne, and headed in the general direction of the lake-front section which was being used as a spaceport by the one Vegan destroyer stationed on Ulphi, before she was reminded suddenly that Central City had police ships for emergency use, which could fly rings around any flow-car—and that long, silvery, dirigible-like shapes seemed to be riding on guard directly over the area to which she wanted to go!

A few minutes later, she realized the ship might also be several miles to either side of the spaceport. At this distance and altitude she couldn't tell, and the flow-car refused to be urged any higher.

She had kept the clumsy conveyance on its course, because she hadn't really much choice of direction. There was no way of contacting or locating any of the other Vegan officials currently operating on Ulphi except through the destroyer itself or through the communicators in her own study; and her mobile-unit was also in the spaceport area. There were enough similar cars moving about by themselves to keep her from being conspicuous, though traffic, on the whole, was moderate over the city and most of it was confined to fairly definite streams between the more important points.

A second police ship became briefly visible far to her right, gliding close to the building tops and showing hardly more than its silhouette through a light haze which veiled that sector. If they knew where she was, either of the two could intercept her within minutes.

Very probably though, Jasse reassured herself, nobody did know just where she was. The mental force still assailing her shield was non-directional in any spatial sense; and her departure from the Historical Institute must have been much more sudden and swift than had been anticipated by her concealed attackers. In spite of her size, strangers were quite likely to underestimate her because of her slender build and rather childlike features, and on occasions like this that could be very useful. But—

Jasse bit her lip gently, conscious of a small flurry of panic bubbling up inside her and subsiding again, temporarily.

Because they needed only to ring off the spaceport, far enough away from the destroyer to avoid arousing its interest, and then wait for her arrival. She would have to come to them then—and soon! Her shield was still absorbing the punishment it was getting, but secondary effects of that unrelenting pressure had begun to show up. The barest touch of a dozen different, slowly spreading sensations within her brain—burning, tingling, constricting, dully throbbing sensations. Within the last few minutes, the first

flickering traces of visual and auditory disturbances had appeared. Effects like that could build up for an indeterminate time without doing any real damage. But in the end they would merge suddenly into an advanced stage of blurred confusion—technically, her shield might still maintain its function; but she would no longer know or be able to control what she did.

A curiously detached feeling overcame Jasse then as the flow-car carried her steadily forward into whatever lay ahead. What she had to do was clear enough: go on until she was discovered and then ground the flow-car and try her luck on foot. But meanwhile, who or what had stirred up this mess about her? What were they after?

She sat quietly behind the flow-car's simple controls, leaning forward a trifle to conceal herself, while her mind ran over the implications of the odd little speech she had made in the park before Moyuscane's tomb. Those hadn't been her thoughts; if they had been, she wouldn't have uttered them voluntarily—so, shielded or not, somebody must have been tampering with her mind before this! Were there opposing groups of mental adepts on Ulphi, and was one of them trying to use her, and Vega, against the other in some struggle for control of this planetary civilization?

Once more then, System Chief Jasse surprised herself completely—this time by a flash of furious exasperation with the lofty D.C. policies which had put her in a spot like this unarmed. To trust in the innate rightness of A-Class humanity was all very well. But, mysterious superior mentalities or not, a good, ordinary, old-fashioned blaster in her hand would have been *so* satisfactory just now!

"Oh, Suns and Planets!" Jasse muttered aloud, shocked into a half-forgotten Traditionalist invocation acquired during her childhood. "They've got me fighting mad!"

And at that moment, a clean-edged shadow, which was not the shadow of any cloud, came sliding soundlessly over the flow-car and stayed there.

Jasse, heart pounding wildly, was still trying to twist around far enough to look up without pitching herself out of the car or releasing its controls when a voice, some twenty feet above her, remarked conversationally:

"Say—I thought it was you!"

* * *

She stared up speechlessly.

The words had been Vegan—and nothing like that dull-green, seamless, thirty-foot sliver of space-alloy floating overhead had ever been dreamed up on Ulphi! While the pert, huge-eyed face that peered down at her out of the craft's open lock—she remembered suddenly the last time she'd met that member of a nonhuman race in a G.Z. space-duty uniform and the polite effort she'd made to mask the antipathy and suspicions which were bound to arise in a Traditionalist when confronted by any such half-and-half creature.

But—safe!

A shaking began in her knees. She sat down quietly.

And Zone Agent Pagadan, for whom any kind of thought-shield on which she really directed her attention became as sheerest summer gossamer—unless, of course, it was backed by a mind that approximated her own degree of nerve-energy control—smiled amiably and chalked one up to her flair for dramatic timing.

"Remember me, eh?" she nodded. "Pelial, of Galactic Zones, at your service! I was scoping the area from ten miles above and spotted you drifting along by yourself. What occurs, my tall colleague? Are you just going sightseeing in that piece of primitive craftsmanship, or did your pilot fall out?"

"Ulp—!" began Jasse, nodding and shaking her head at the same time. Pagadan's contemplative eyes became a little bigger.

"Skip it!" she said apprehensively. "From close up, you look both chewed on and distraught, my girl! What happ— Hey, hang on a moment and I'll slide in close and take you aboard. Maybe you ought to be home in bed, or something."

The head withdrew; and Jasse took a deep, sighing breath, raked a snarled strand of black hair out

of her forehead and dabbed tentatively at a deep scratch on the back of her hand.

She did look a mess, now that she noticed it—the Greens were badly ripped and streaked with the blue chalk of the pavement over which she had rolled; and her jeweled cap was gone. A moment passed before she realized suddenly that the clinging constrictions of the mental attack were gone, too!

She was still wondering about that as she swung over into the space-skiff, steadied by Pagadan's gloved hand.

Then, as the skiff's lock slammed shut behind her, she made another discovery:

Her shield-bracelet hung free, attached to her wrist now only by its safety chain. The shield switch flickered, warningly red, on "Open"—

"Your mind-shield?" The Lannai Agent, measuring a rose-colored liquid carefully from a fat little jug into a cup, absently repeated Jasse's stunned exclamation. "Probably snagged the bracelet while you were climbing in from the car. It happens." She glanced around and her eyes caught the light with a wicked crystalline glitter. "Why? Could it matter? Was someone pressuring you?"

"They were before," Jasse whispered; and suddenly there wasn't any question about her being frightened! Panic hammered into her brain and stayed; a dizzy shimmering grew before her eyes. Mixed with that came a queer, growing feeling as if something were surging and pulsing within her skull—a wildly expectant feeling of *something* about to happen.

She realized the Lannai was holding the filled cup to her lips.

"Drink that!" the cool voice ordered. "Whatever you've got it's good for. Then just settle back, relax, and let's hear what you know!"

* * *

The liquid she had gulped, Jasse noticed, wasn't really rose-colored as she had thought, but a deep, dim, ruby red, almost black—an enormously *quiet* color—and with a highly curious slowing-down effect on things, too! For instance, you might realize perfectly well that somewhere, out around the edges of you, you were still horribly upset, with fear-thoughts racing about everywhere at a dizzy speed. Every so often, one of them would turn inwards and come shooting right at you, flashing like a freezing arrow into the deep-red dusk where you were. But just as you started to shrink away from it, you noticed it was getting slower and slower, the farther it came; until finally it just stayed where it was, and then gradually melted away.

They never could get through to reach you. It was rather comical!

It appeared she had asked some question about it, because the big-eyed little humanoid was saying:

"You like the effect, eh? That's just antishock, little chum! Thought you knew the stuff . . . don't they teach you anything at Cultures?"

That was funny, too! Cultures, of course, taught you everything there was to know! But wait—hadn't there been . . . what had there been that she—? Jasse decided to examine that point about Cultures very carefully, some other time.

By and large there seemed to be a good deal of quiet conversation going on around her. Perhaps she was doing some of it, but it was hard to tell; since, frankly, she wasn't much interested in those outside events any more. And then, for a while, the two tall shapes, the man and the woman, came up again to the barrier in her past and tried to talk to her, as they always did when she was feeling anxious and alone. A little puzzled, because she didn't feel that way now, Jasse watched them from her side of the barrier, which was where the explosions and shrieking lights were, that had brought terror and hurt and the sudden forgetting which none of Culture's therapists had been able to lift. Dimly, she could sense the world behind them, to which they wanted her to go—the star-glittering cold and the great silent flows of snow, and the peace and enchantment that were there. But she could make no real effort to reach it now, and in the end the tall shapes seemed to realize that and went away.

Or else, they merely faded out of her sight as the color about her deepened ever more from ruby redness into the ultimate, velvety, all-quieting, all-slowing-down *black*—

"Wonderful—" Jasse murmured contentedly, asleep.

* * *

"Hallerock?"

"Linked in, Pag! I'm back on the Observation Ship again. Go ahead."

"Just keep this thought-line down tight! Everything's working like a charm, so far. I tripped the D.C.'s shield open when I took her aboard, and our good friend Moyuscane came right in, all set to take control and find out whether we actually knew something about him and his setup here or not. Then he discovered I was around, and he's been lying quiet and just listening through her ever since."

"What makes him shy of you?" Hallerock inquired.

"He tried a long-range probe at my shields a couple of weeks ago. I slapped him on the beak—some perfectly natural startled-reaction stuff by another telepath, you understand. But he certainly didn't like it! He went out fast, that time—"

"I don't blame him," Hallerock said thoughtfully. "Sometimes you don't realize your own strength. Does the D.C. really have anything on him?"

"No. It's about as we suspected. She made some sort of innocent remark—I couldn't take the chance of digging around in her mind long enough to find out just what—and Moyuscane jumped to the wrong conclusions."

"I was wondering, you know," Hallerock admitted, "whether you mightn't have done some work on the Cultures girl in advance—something that would get her to drop a few bricks at some appropriate occasion."

"Well, you're just naturally a suspicious little squirt!" Pagadan replied amiably. "To use Confederacy personnel against their will and knowledge for any such skulduggery is strictly counter-regulation. I advise you to make a note of the fact! However, it was the luckiest sort of coincidence. It should save us a week or two of waiting, especially since you have the hospital ship and staff all prepared. Moyuscane's got himself a listening-post right in our ranks now, and that's all he needs to stay reasonably safe—he thinks!"

Hallerock appeared to be digesting this information for a moment. Then his thought came again:

"Where are you at present?"

"Down at the Central City spaceport, still in the *Viper's* skiff. The D.C.'s under antishock and asleep on the bunk here."

"Oh," said Hallerock, "you're all ready to start the drive then?"

"Wake up, little brother!" Pagadan advised him. "It started ten minutes ago! The last thing I told the girl before she went down deep was that a Vegan Fleet Hospital Ship was approaching Ulphi with a brand-new, top-secret drug against space-fear, called Kynoleen—a free gift from the Confederacy to the afflicted population of this planet."

"Well . . . I suppose I'd better set the H-Ship down at the spaceport about an hour from now, then?"

"One hour would be about right. Moyuscane must be in a considerable stew at the prospect of having the Kynoleen disclose the fact that most of the local population is suffering from an artificially imposed space-fear psychosis, but it won't take him long to see to it that the drug won't actually be used around here for quite some time. When that's settled, we'll let him breathe easier for about three hours. Then I'll wake up the D.C., make sure he's listening through her and feed him the *big* jolt. So see I get that message we've prepared half an hour beforehand—three hours and thirty minutes from now! And send it as a straight coded communication, to make it look authentic."

"All right," Hallerock said doubtfully. "But wouldn't it be better to check over the entire schedule once more—just to be sure nothing can go wrong?"

"There's no need for that!" the Lannai said, surprised. "We've got Moyuscane analyzed down to the length of his immortal whiskers, and we've worked out the circumstances required to produce the exact effects we want. It's just a matter of timing it now. You're not letting yourself get rattled by a Telepath of the Second Order, are you? If he didn't happen to have the planet under control, this wouldn't be a job

for Galactic Zones at all."

"Possibly not," said Hallerock reasonably, "but then he does have it under control. Enough to hash it up from one pole to the other if he panics. That's what keeps putting this dew on my brow."

"Agent-Trainee Hallerock," Pagadan replied impatiently, "I love you like a son or something, but at times you talk like a dope. Even a Telep-Two doesn't panic, unless you let him get the idea he's cornered. All we've got to do is keep Moyuscane's nose pointed towards the one way out and give him time enough to use it when we switch on the pressure—but not quite time enough to change his mind again. If it makes you feel any better, you could put trackers on any unprotected Vegans for the next eight hours."

Hallerock laughed uneasily. "I just finished doing that," he admitted.

Pagadan shrugged. Gloomy old Hallerock! From here on out, he'd be waiting for the worst to happen, though this kind of a job, as anyone who had studied his training records would know, was right up his alley. And it had been a pleasure, at that, to observe the swift accuracy with which he'd planned and worked out the schedule and details of this operation, in spite of head-shakings and forebodings. The only thing he couldn't possibly have done was to take the responsibility for it himself.

She smiled faintly, and came over to sit down for a while beside the bunk on which Jasse was lying.

* * *

Two hours later, when her aide contacted her again, he seemed comparatively optimistic.

"Reaction as predicted," he reported laconically. "I'm beginning to believe you might know what you're doing."

"Moyuscane's got the Kynoleen space-tests stalled?"

"Yes. The whole affair was hushed up rather neatly. The H-Ship is down now at some big biochemical center five hundred miles from Central City, and the staff was routed through to top officials immediately. The question was raised then whether Ulphian body chemistry mightn't have varied just far enough from standard A-Class to make it advisable to conduct a series of local lab experiments with the drug before putting it to use. Our medics agreed and were asked, as between scientists, to keep the matter quiet meanwhile, to avoid exciting the population unduly. There also was the expected vagueness as to how long the experiments might take."

"It makes it so much easier," Pagadan said gratefully, "when the opposition is using its brains! Was anyone shown around the ship?"

"A few dozen types of specialists are still prowling all over it. They've been introduced to our personnel. It seems a pretty safe bet," Hallerock acknowledged hesitantly, "that Moyuscane has discovered there isn't a shielded mind among them, and that he can take control of the crate and its crew whenever he wants." He paused. "So now we just wait a while?"

"And let him toy around with the right kind of ideas," agreed Pagadan. "He should be worried just enough by now to let them come floating up naturally."

Night had fallen over Central City when the message she was expecting was rattled suddenly from the skiff's communicator. She decoded it, produced evidence of considerable emotional shock, shook Jasse awake and, in a few dozen suitably excited sentences, handed Moyuscane his jolt. After that, though, there were some anxious moments before she got her patient quieted down enough to let the antishock resume its over-all effect.

"She kept wanting to get up and do something about it!" Pagadan reported to Hallerock, rubbing a slightly sprained wrist. "But I finally got it across that it wasn't Cultures' job to investigate undercover mass homicide on a foreign planet, and that one of our own Zone Agents, no less, was landing secretly tomorrow to take charge of the case."

"And that," said Hallerock darkly, "really *is* switching on the pressure!"

"Just pressure enough for our purpose. It's still a big, hidden organization that's suspected of those fancy murder rituals, and not just one little telepath who's played at being planetary god for the past few centuries. Of course, if we'd pointed a finger straight at Moyuscane himself, he would have cracked right

there."

She passed a small handkerchief once, quickly, over her forehead. "This kind of thing is likely to be a bit nerve-racking until you get used to it," she added reassuringly. "I can remember when I've felt just about as jumpy as you're feeling now. But all we have to do is to settle down and let Moyuscane work out his little problem by himself. He can't help seeing the answer—"

But a full two hours passed then, and the better part of a third, while Pelial, the minor official of Galactic Zones, continued to work quietly at her files of reports and recordings, and received and dispatched various coded communications connected with the impending arrival of her superior—the hypothetical avenging Zone Agent.

By now, she conceded at last, she might be beginning to feel a little disturbed, though, naturally, she had prepared alternative measures, in case—

Hallerock's thought flashed questioningly into her mind then. For a moment, Pagadan stopped breathing.

* * *

"Linked!" she told him crisply. "Go ahead!"

"The leading biochemists of Ulphi," Hallerock informed her, "have just come up with a scientific achievement that would be regarded as noteworthy almost anywhere—"

"You subhuman comic!" snapped Pagadan. "*Tell* me!"

". . . Inasmuch as they were able to complete—analyze, summarize and correlate—all tests required to establish the complete harmlessness of the new space-fear drug Kynoleen for all type variations of Ulphian body-chemistry. They admit that, to some extent, they are relying—"

"Hallerock," Pagadan interrupted, in cold sincerity now, "you drag in one more unnecessary detail, and the very next time I meet you, you're going to be a great, big, ugly-looking dead body!"

"That's not like you, Pag!" Hallerock complained. "Well, they rushed fifty volunteers over to the H-Ship anyway, to have Kynoleen given a final check in space right away—all Ulphi is now to have the benefit of it as soon as possible. But nobody seemed particularly upset when our medics reminded them they had been informed that the ship was equipped to conduct tests on only *one* subject at a time—"

Pagadan drew a shivery breath and sat suffused for a moment by a pure, bright glow of self-admiration.

"When will they take off with him?" she inquired with quiet triumph.

"They took off ten minutes ago," her aide returned innocently, "and headed straight out. As a matter of fact, just before I beamed you, the test-subject had discovered that ten minutes in space will get you a whole lot farther than any Telep-Two can drive a directing thought. It seemed to disturb him to lose contact with Ulphi—WOW! Watch it, Pag! Supposing I hadn't been shielded when that lethal stunner of yours landed!"

"That's a beautiful supposition!" hissed Pagadan. "Some day, you won't be! But the planet's safe, anyway—I guess I can forgive you. And now, my friend, you may start worrying about the ship!"

"I've got to compliment you," she admitted a while later, "on the job you did when you installed those PT-cells. What I call perfect coverage! Half the time I don't know myself from just what point of the ship I'm watching the show."

She was curled up now in a large chair, next to the bunk on which Jasse still slumbered quietly; and she appeared almost as completely relaxed as her guest. The upper part of her head was covered by something like a very large and thick-walled but apparently light helmet, which came down over her forehead to a line almost with her eyes, and her eyes were closed.

"Just at the moment"—Hallerock hesitated—"I think you're using the Peeping Tommy in the top left corner of the visitank Moyuscane's looking into. He still doesn't really like the idea of being out in deep space, does he?"

"No, but he's got his dislike of it under control," Pagadan said lazily. "He's the one," she added presently, "who directed the attack on our D.C. today at the Historical Institute. She has a short but very

sharp memory-picture of him. So it *is* Moyuscane, all right!"

"You mean," Hallerock asked, stunned, "you weren't really sure of it?"

"Well—you can't ever be *sure* till everything's all over," Pagadan informed him cheerfully. "And then you sometimes wonder." She opened her eyes, changed her position in the chair and settled back carefully again. "Don't you pass out on me, Hallerock!" she warned. "You're supposed to be recording every single thing that happens on the H-Ship for Lab!"

There hadn't been, Hallerock remarked, apparently still somewhat disturbed, very much to record as yet. The dark-skinned, trimly bearded Ulphian volunteer was, of course, indulging in a remarkable degree of activity, considering he'd been taken on board solely as an object of scientific investigation. But no one about him appeared to find anything odd in that. Wherever he went, padding around swiftly on bare feet and dressed in a set of white hospital pajamas, the three doctors who made up the ship's experimental staff followed him earnestly, with a variety of instruments at the ready, rather like a trio of mother hens trailing an agitated chicken. Occasionally, they interrupted whatever he was doing and carried out some swift examination or other, to which he submitted indifferently.

But he spoke neither to them nor to any of the ship's officers he passed. And they, submerged in their various duties with an intentness which alone might have indicated that this was no routine flight, appeared unaware of his presence.

"The old boy's an organizer," Pagadan conceded critically. "He's put a flock of experts to work for him, and he's smart enough to leave them alone. They've got the ship on her new course by now, haven't they? Can you make out where they think they're going?"

Hallerock told her.

"An eighty-three day trip!" she said thoughtfully. "Looks like he didn't want to have anything at all to do with us any more! Someone on board must know what's in that region—or was able to get information on it."

Up to the end, that was almost all there was to see. At a velocity barely below the cruising speed of a Vegan destroyer, the H-Ship moved away from Ulphi. Like a harried executive, too involved in weighty responsibilities to bother about his informal attire, the solitary Ulphian continued to roam about within the ship, disregarded by all but his attendant physicians. But finally—he was back in the ship's big control room by then and had just cast another distasteful glance at the expanse of star-glittering blackness within the visitank between the two pilots—Moyuscane began to speak.

It became startlingly clear in that instant how completely alone he actually was among the H-Ship's control crew. Like a man who knows he need not act with restraint in a dream peopled by phantoms, the ex-ruler of Ulphi poured forth what was in his mind, in a single screaming spurt of frustrated fury and fears and hopes that should have swung the startled attention of everybody within hearing range upon him, like the sudden ravings of a madman.

The pilots became involved with the chief navigator and his two assistants in a brisk five-cornered discussion of a stack of hitherto unused star-plates. The three doctors gathered about the couch on which Moyuscane sat—exchanged occasional comments with the calm unhurriedness of men observing the gradual development of a test, the satisfactory conclusion of which already is assured.

* * *

As suddenly as the outburst had begun, it was over. The Ulphian wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sat scowling quietly at the floor.

"I think," said Pagadan, "you could start the destroyers out after them now, Hallerock!"

"I just did," Hallerock said. "I clocked the end of 'minimum effective period' right in the middle of that little speech."

"So did I," she replied. "And I hope it won't be too long now. I've got work to do here, and it shouldn't wait."

There were sufficiently deadly gadgets of various types installed throughout the fugitive ship, which they could have operated through the PT-cells. But since all of them involved some degree of risk to the

ship's personnel they were intended for emergency use only—in case Moyuscane attempted to vent his annoyance with the change in his worldly fortunes on one of his new subjects. Pagadan, however, had not believed that the recent lord of all Ulphi would be capable of wasting any part of his reduced human resources for any motive so impractical as spite.

Convinced by now that she was right in that, she waited, more patiently on the whole than Hallerock, for something safer than gun or gas to conclude Moyuscane's career.

It caught up with him some twenty minutes later—something that touched him and went through him in a hardly perceptible fashion, like the twitching of a minor electric shock.

The reaction of the two watchers was so nearly simultaneous that neither knew afterwards which of them actually tripped the thought-operated mechanism which filled the H-Ship briefly with a flicker of cold radiation near the upper limit of visibility for that particular crew.

To that signal, the ship's personnel reacted in turn, though in a far more leisurely manner. They blinked about doubtfully for a few seconds as if trying to remember something; and then—wherever they were and whatever they happened to be doing—they settled down deliberately on chairs, bunks, beds, and the floor, stretched out, and went to sleep.

Moyuscane alone remained active, since his nerve centers had not been drenched several days before with a catalyst held there in suspense until that flare of radiance should touch it off. Almost within seconds though, he was plucked out of his appalled comprehension of the fact that there was no longer a single mind within his reach that would respond to control. For Kynoleen gave complete immunity to space-fear within the time limit determined by the size of the dose and the type of organism affected, but none at all thereafter. And whatever the nature of the shattering terrors the hidden mechanisms of the mind flung up when gripped in mid-space by that dreaded psychosis, their secondary effects on body and brain were utterly devastating.

Swiftly and violently, then, Moyuscane the Immortal died, some four centuries after his time, bones and muscles snapping in the mounting fury of the Fear's paroxysms. Hallerock, still conscientiously observing and recording for G.Z. Lab's omnivorous files, felt somewhat sick. But Pagadan appeared undisturbed.

"I'd have let him out an easier way if it could have been done safely," her thought came indifferently. "But he would, after all, have considered this barely up to his own standards of dispatch. Turn the ship back now and let the destroyers pick it up, will you, Hallerock? I'll be along to see you after a while—"

* * *

The *Viper* came slamming up behind the Observation Ship some five hours later, kicked it negligently out of its orbit around Ulphi, slapped on a set of tractors fore and aft, and hauled it in, lock to lock.

"Just thirty-five seconds ago," Hallerock informed Pagadan coldly as she trotted into the O-Ship's control room, "every highly condemned instrument on this unusually condemned crate got knocked clean out of alignment! Any suggestions as to what might have caused it?"

"Your language, my pet!" Pagadan admonished, for his actual phrasing had been more crisp. She flipped a small package across his desk into his hands. "To be studied with care immediately after my departure! But you might open it now."

A five-inch cube of translucence made up half the package. It contained the full-length image of a slender girl with shining black hair, who carried a javelin in one hand and wore the short golden skirt of a contestant in the planetary games of Jeltad.

"Cute kid!" Hallerock acknowledged. "Vegan, eh? The rest of it's a stack of her equation-plates? Who is she and what do I do about it?"

"That's our Department of Cultures investigator," Pagadan explained.

"The System Chief?" Hallerock said surprised. He glanced at the image again, which was a copy of one of Snoops' three-dimensionals, and looked curiously up at the Lannai. "Didn't you just finish doing a mental job on her?"

"In a way. Mostly a little hypno-information to bring her up to date on what's been going on around Ulphi—including her part in it. She was asleep in that D.C. perambulator she's camping in here when I left her."

"As I understand it," Hallerock remarked thoughtfully, "the recent events on Ulphi would be classified as information very much restricted to Galactic Zones! So you wouldn't have spotted the makings of a G.Z. parapsychic mind in a D.C. System Chief, would you?"

"Bright boy! I'll admit it's an unlikely place to look for one, but she is a type we can use. I'm releasing her now for G.Z. information, on Agent authority. Her equation-plates will tell you how to handle her in case she runs into emotional snags while absorbing it. You're to be stationed on Ulphi another four months anyway, and you're to consider that a high-priority part of your job."

"I will? Another four months?" Hallerock repeated incredulously. "I was winding up things on the O-Ship to start back to Jeltad. You don't need me around here any more, do you?"

"I don't, no!" Pagadan appeared to be quietly enjoying herself. "The point is, though, I'm the one who's leaving. Got word from Central two hours ago to report back at speed, just as soon as we'd mopped up Old Man Moyuscane."

"What for?" Hallerock began to look bewildered. "The Agent work isn't finished here."

She shook her head. "Don't know myself yet! But it's got to do with the recordings on those pickled Bjantas you homed back to Lab. Central sounded rather excited." The silver eyes were sparkling with unconcealed delight now. "It's to be a Five-Agent Mission, Hallerock!" she fairly sang. "Beyond Galactic Rim!"

"Beyond the Rim? For Bjanta? They've got something really new on them then!" Hallerock had come to his feet.

Pagadan nodded and smacked her lips lightly. "Sounds like it, doesn't it? New and conclusive—and we delivered it to them! But now look what a face it's making," she added maliciously, "just because it doesn't get to go along!"

Hallerock scowled and laughed. "Well, I've been wondering all this time about those Bjantas. Now you take out after them—and I can hang around Ulphi dishing out a little therapy to a D.C. neurotic."

"We all start out small," said the Lannai. "Look at me—would you believe that a few short years ago I was nothing but the High Queen of Lar-Sancaya? Not," she added loyally, "that there's a sweeter planet anywhere, from the Center to the Clouds or beyond!"

"And that stretch distinctly includes Ulphi," Hallerock stated, unreconciled to his fate. "When's the new Agent coming out to this hive of morons?"

Pagadan slid to her feet off the edge of the desk and surveyed him pityingly. "You poor chump! What I gave you just now was Advance Mission Information, wasn't it? Ever hear of a time that wasn't restricted to Zone Agent levels? Or do I have to tell you officially that you've just finished putting in a week as a Z.A. under orders?"

Hallerock stared at her. His mouth opened and shut and opened again. "Here, wait a—" he began. She waved him into silence with both fists.

"Close it kindly, and listen to the last instructions I'm giving you! Ulphi's being taken in as a Class 18 System-outpost garrison. I imagine even you don't have to be told that the only thing not strictly routine about the procedure will be the elimination of every traceable connection between its present culture and Moyuscane's personal influence on it—and our recent corrective operation?"

"Well, of course!" Hallerock said hoarsely. "But look here, Pag—"

"Considerable amount of detail work in that, naturally—it's why the monitors at Central have assigned you four whole months for the job. When you're done here, report back to Jeltad. They've already started roughing out your robot, but they'll need you around to transfer basic impulse patterns and so on. A couple of months more, and you'll be equipped for any dirty work they can think up—and I gather the Chief's already thought up some sweet ones especially for you! So God help you—and now I'm off. Unless you've got some more questions?"

Hallerock looked at her, his face impassive now. If she had been human he couldn't have told her. But, unlike most of the men of Pagadan's acquaintance, Hallerock never forgot that the Lannai were of another kind. It was one of the things she liked about him.

"No, I haven't any questions just now," he said. "But if I'm put to work by myself on even a job like this, I'm going to feel lost and alone. I just don't have the feeling that I can be trusted with Z.A. responsibility."

Pagadan waved him off again, impatiently.

"The feeling will grow on you," she assured him.

And then she was gone.

* * *

As motion and velocity were normally understood, the *Viper's* method of homeward progress was something else again. But since the only exact definition of it was to be found in a highly complex grouping of mathematical concepts, such terms would have to do.

She was going home, then, at approximately half her normal speed, her automatic receptors full out. Pagadan sat at her desk, blinking reflectively into the big vision tank, while she waited for a call that had to be coming along any moment now.

She felt no particular concern about it. In fact, she could have stated to the minute how long it would take Hallerock to recover far enough from the state of slight shock she'd left him in to reach out for the set of dossier-plates lying on his desk. A brief section of System Chief Jasse's recent behavior-history, with the motivation patterns underlying it, was revealed in those plates, in the telepathic shorthand which turned any normally active hour of an individual's life into as complete a basis for analysis as ordinary understanding required.

She'd stressed that job just enough to make sure he'd attend to it before turning to any other duties. And Hallerock was a quick worker. It should take him only three or four minutes to go through the plates, the first time.

But then he'd just sit there for about a minute, frowning down at them, looking a little baffled and more than a little worried. Poor old Hallerock! Now he couldn't even handle a simple character-analysis any more unaided!

Grimly he'd rearrange the dossier-plates, tap them together into a neat little pile, and start all over again. He'd go through each one very slowly and carefully now, determined to catch the mistake that *had* to be there!

Pagadan grinned faintly.

Almost to the calculated second, his search-thought came flickering after her down the curving line to Jeltad. As the *Viper's* receptors caught it and brought it in, she flipped over the transmitter switch:

"Linked, Hallerock—nice reach you've got! What gives, my friend?"

There was a short pause; then:

"Pag, what's wrong with her—the D.C., I mean?"

"Wrong with her?" Pagadan returned, on a note of mild surprise.

"In the plates," Hallerock explained carefully. "She's an undeveloped parapsychic, all right—a Telep-Three, at the least. But she's also under a master-delusion—thinks she's a physical monster of some kind! Which she obviously isn't."

The Lannai hesitated, letting a trickle of uncertainty through to him to indicate a doubtful mental search. There wasn't, after all, anything that took quite such ticklish, sensitive handling as a parapsychic mind that had gone thoroughly off the beam.

"Oh, that!" she said, suddenly and obviously relieved. "That's no delusion, Hallerock—just one of those typical sub-level exaggerations. No doubt I overemphasized it a little. There's nothing wrong with her really—she's A-Class plus. Very considerably plus, as you say. But she's not a Vegan."

"Not a Vegan? Well, why should—"

"And, of course, she's always been quite sensitive about that physical peculiarity!" Pagadan resumed, with an air of happy discovery. "Even as a child. But with the Traditionalist training she was getting, she couldn't consciously admit any awareness of isolation from other human beings. It's just that our D.C.'s a foundling, Hallerock. I should have mentioned it, I suppose. They picked her up in space, and she's of some unidentified human breed that grows around eight foot tall—"

* * *

Back in the study of her mobile-unit, System Chief Jasse wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and pocketed her handkerchief decisively.

She'd blubbered for an hour after she first woke up. The Universe of the Traditionalists had been such a nice, tidy, easy-to-understand place to live in, even if she'd never felt *completely* at her ease there! It had its problems to be met and solved, of course; and there were the lesser, nonhuman races, to be coolly pitied for their imperfections and kept under control for their own good, and everybody else's. But that A-Class humanity could work itself into such a dismally gruesome mess as it had done on Ulphi—that just wasn't any part of the Traditionalist picture! They didn't want any such information there. They could live more happily without it.

Well, let them live happily then! She was still Jasse, the spaceborn, and in return for knocking down the mental house of cards she'd been living in, the tricky little humanoid at any rate had made her aware of some unsuspected possibilities of her own which she could now develop.

She began to re-examine those discoveries about herself with a sort of new, cool, speculating interest. There were two chains of possibilities really—that silent, cold, whitely enchanted world of her childhood dreams came floating up in her mind again, clear and distinct under its glittering night-sky now that the barriers that had blurred it in her memory had been dissolved. The home-world of her distant race! She could go to it if she chose, straight and unerringly, and find the warm human strength and companionship that waited there. That knowledge had been returned to her, too.

But was that what she wanted most?

There was another sort of companionship, the Lannai had implied, and a different sort of satisfaction she could gain, beyond that of placidly living out her life among her own kind on even the most beautiful of frozen worlds. They were constructing a civilized galaxy just now, and they would welcome her on the job.

* * *

She'd bathed, put on a fresh uniform and was pensively waiting for her breakfast to present itself from the wall-butler in the study, when the unit's automatic announcer addressed her:

"Galactic Zones Agent Hallerock requesting an interview."

Jasse started and half turned in her chair to look at the closed door. Now what did that mean? She didn't want to see any of *them* just yet! She intended to make up her own mind on the matter.

She said, a little resentfully:

"Well . . . let him right in, please!"

The study door opened as she flipped the lock-switch on her desk. A moment later, Hallerock was bowing to her from the entrance hall just beyond it.

Jasse began to rise, glanced up at him; and then sat back suddenly and gave him another look.

"Hello, Jasse!" Hallerock said, in a voice that sounded amiable but remarkably self-assured.

Even when not set off as now by his immaculate blue and white G.Z. dress uniform, Zone Agent Hallerock undoubtedly was something almost any young woman would look at twice. However, it wasn't so much that he was strikingly handsome with his short-cropped dark-red hair and the clear, black-green eyes with their suggestion of some icy midnight ocean. The immediate point was that you didn't have to look twice to know that he came from no ordinary planet of civilization.

Jasse got up slowly from behind her desk and came around it and stood before Hallerock.

Basically, that was it perhaps—the world he came from! Mark Wieri VI, a frontier-type planet, so infernally deserving of its classification that only hare-brained first-stage Terrans would have settled there

in the first place. Where the equatorial belt was a riot of throbbing colors, a maddened rainbow flowering and ripening, for two months of a thirty-eight month year—and then, like the rest of that bleak world forever, sheet-ice and darkness and the soundless, star-glittering cold.

Even back on Terra, two paths had been open to life that faced the Great Cold as its chosen environment. To grow squalidly tough, devoted to survival in merciless single-mindedness—or to flourish into a triumphant excess of strength that no future challenge could more than half engage.

On Mark Wieri's world, human life had adapted, inevitably, to its relentlessly crushing environment. In the two hundred and eighty-odd generations between the last centuries of the First Stellar Migrations and the day an exploring Giant-Ranger of the Confederacy turned in that direction, it had become as much a part of its background as the trout is of its pool. And no more than the trout could it see any purpose in leaving so good a place again.

But it had not, in any sense, grown squalid.

So Jasse stood before Hallerock, and she was still looking up at him. There were nine foot three inches of him to look up to, shaped into four hundred and sixty-five lean pounds of tigerish symmetry.

The dress uniform on a duty call was a clue she didn't miss or need. The ice of his home-planet was in Hallerock's eyes; but so was the warm, loyal human strength that had triumphed over it and carelessly paid in then the full, final price of conquest. This son of the conquerors alone had been able to sense that the galaxy itself was now just wide and deep and long enough for man; and so he'd joined the civilization that was of a like spirit.

But he, too, had been a giant among little-people then. If his conscious thoughts wouldn't admit it, every cell of his body knew he'd lost his own kind.

Jasse, all her mind groping carefully, questioningly out towards this phenomenon, this monster-slayer of Galactic Zones—beginning to understand all that and a good deal more—slowly relaxed again.

A kinsman of hers! Her own eyes began to smile, finally.

"Hello, Hallerock!" Jasse said.

* * *

And that was, Pagadan decided, about the right moment to dissolve the PT-cell she'd spent an hour installing in the wall just above the upper right-hand corner of Jasse's study mirror.

Those two baby giants might be all full of emotional flutters just now at having met someone from the old home town; but they were going to start thinking of their good friend Pagadan almost immediately! And one of the very first things that would leap to Hallerock's suspicious mind would be the possible presence of a Peeping Tommy.

Good thing those tiny units left no detectable trace!

She pulled off the PT-helmet, yawned delicately and sat relaxed for a minute, smirking reminiscently into the vision-tank.

"What I call a really profitable mission!" she informed the vision-tank. "Not a slip anywhere either—and just think how tame it all started out!"

She thought about that for a moment. The silver eyes closed slowly; and opened again.

"It's no particular wonder," she remarked, "that Central's picked me for a Five-Agent job—after only five missions! When you get right down to it, you can't beat a Lannai brain!"

The hundred thousand friendly points of light in the vision-tank applauded her silently. Pagadan smiled at them. In the middle of the smile her eyes closed once more—and this time, they stayed closed. Her head began to droop forward.

Then she sat up with a start.

"Hey," she said in drowsy indignation, "what's all this?"

"Sleepy gas," the *Viper's* voice returned. "If you're headed for another job, you're going to sleep all the way to Jeltad. You need your rest."

"That's a whole week!" Pagadan protested. But though she could not remember being transported

there, she was in her somno-cabin by then, and flat on her back. Pillows were just being shoved under her head; and lights were going out all over the ship.

"You big, tricky bum!" she muttered. "I'll dismantle your reflexes yet!"

There was no answer to that grim threat; but she couldn't have heard it anyway. A week was due to pass before Zone Agent Pagadan would be permitted to become aware of her surroundings again.

Meanwhile, a dim hum had begun to grow throughout the *Viper's* giant body. Simultaneously, in the darkened and deserted control room, a bright blue spark started climbing steadily up the velocity indicator.

The humming rose suddenly to a howl, thinned out and became inaudible.

The spark stood gleaming steadily then at a point just below the line marked "Emergency."

Space had flattened out before the *Viper*—she was homeward-bound with another mission accomplished.

She began to travel—

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