

The End of the Line

The spaceship dropped near evening towards the edge of a curving beach. A half-mile strip of grassy growth stood tall and still behind the beach; beyond the jungle smoothly marbled prows of pink and gray cliffs swept steeply upwards for nearly two thousand feet to the northernmost shelf of a wide, flat continent. The green-black waters of the planet's largest ocean stretched away in a glassy curve ahead, broken by two narrow chains of islands some thirty miles out.

The sleek machine from beyond the stars settled down slowly, a wind thundering out below it and wrinkling the shallows near the beach into sudden zigzag patterns. It fell through explosive sprays of dry sand, sank its base twenty feet deep into the rock below, and stopped. A sharp click announced the opening of a lock a third of the way up its rounded flank; and seven of the nine members of Central Government's Exploration Group 1176 came riding out of the lock a moment later, bunched forty feet above the beach on the tip of their ship's extension ramp.

Six of them dropped free of the ramp at various points of its swooping descent. They hit the hard sand in a succession of soft, bounceless thumps like so many cats and went loping off towards the water. Grevan alone, with the restraint to be looked for in a Group Commander, rode the ramp all the way down to the ground.

He stepped off it unhurriedly there: a very big man, heavy of bone and muscle, though lean where weight wasn't useful, and easy-moving as the professional gladiators and beast-fighters whose training quarters he'd shared in his time. A brooding, implacable expression went so naturally with the rest of it that ordinary human beings were likely to give him one look and step out of his way, even when they weren't aware of his technical rank of Central Government Official.

It was a pity in a way that the members of his Exploration Group weren't so easily impressed.

Grevan scowled reflectively, watching five of the six who had come out of the ship with him begin shucking off weapon belts, suits, and other items of equipment with scarcely a break in their run as they approached the water's edge. Cusat, Eliol, Freckles, Lancey, Vernet—he checked them off mentally as they vanished a few seconds later, with almost simultaneous splashes, from the planet's surface. They were of his own experimental breed or something very near it, born in one of Central Government's germination laboratories and physically, though not quite adults yet, very nearly as capable as Grevan was himself. However, nobody could tell from here what sort of alien, carnivorous life might be floating around beyond this ocean's shallows. . . .

They had too good an opinion of themselves!

Weyer, at any rate, seemed to have decided to stay on shore with his clothes on and his armament handy, in case of trouble. Somewhat reassured, Grevan turned his attention next to a metallic bumping and scraping at the ship's open lock overhead. Klim and Muscles, K.P.'s for the day, were trying to move a bulky cooking unit out of the ship so the Group could dine outdoors.

"Boss?" Klim's clear soprano floated down.

"Right here," Grevan called back. "Having trouble?"

"Looks like we're stuck," Klim announced from within the lock. "Would you come up and . . . no, wait a minute! Muscles is getting it cleared now, I think . . . Wait till I've degreaved it again, you big ape! Now, push!"

The cooker popped into sight with a grinding noise, ejected with considerable violence from the ship's interior. For a moment, it hung spinning quietly in the air above the ramp, with Klim perched on top. Then Muscles came out through the lock and attached himself to the gadget's side. They floated down lopsidedly together, accompanied by tinkling sounds from the cooker's interior.

"What's it going to be tonight?" Grevan asked, reaching up to guide them in to an even landing.

"Albert II in mushroom sauce," said Klim. She was a tall, slender blonde with huge blue eyes and a deceptively wistful expression. As he grounded the cooker, she put a hand on his shoulder and stepped down. "Not a very original menu, I'll admit! But there's a nice dessert anyway. How about sampling some local vegetables to go with Albert?"

"Maybe," said Grevan cautiously. "Whose turn is it to sample?" Too often, preoccupied with other matters, he'd discovered suddenly that he'd been roped in again for that chore when the items to be sampled were suspected of being of a particularly uncooperative nature. And then the Group would drop whatever it was doing to gather around and sympathize while he adapted.

"Vernet's turn, isn't it?" said Muscles.

"Vernet's the victim," Klim nodded. "You're safe this time."

"In that case," Grevan said, relieved, "you'll find Vernet out there full fathom five somewhere. Bring her in if you can and we'll go browse in the shrubbery a bit."

"This," Klim remarked, gazing out over the shoreline towards which Muscles was heading in search of Vernet, "is still the best spot of an all-right little world! Know what the cubs were calling it when we first set down here three weeks ago?" She was Grevan's junior by a good ten years but a year or so older than the Group's other members and inclined to regard them all with motherly tolerance. "Our point of no return."

Grevan grimaced uneasily, because that phrase did describe the Group's position here, in one way or another. Never once, in the eight years since Central Government had put him in charge of what had been a flock of rebellious, suspicious, and thoroughly unhappy youngsters, who weren't even sure whether they were actually human beings or some sort of biological robots, had the question of escaping from CG controls been openly discussed among them. You never knew who might be listening, somewhere. The amazing thing to Grevan even now was that—eight weeks travel on the full fury of their great ship's drives beyond the borders of Central Government's sprawling interstellar domain—they did seem to have escaped. But that was a theory that still remained to be proved.

"Are you going to accept contact with CG tomorrow?" Klim inquired.

Grevan shrugged. "I don't know." Their only remaining connection with CG, so far as they could tell, were the vocal messages which flashed subspatially on prearranged occasions between two paired contact sets, one of which was installed on their ship. They had no way of guessing where the other one might be, but it was activated periodically by one of the CG officials who directed the Group's affairs.

"I was going to put it to a vote tonight," Grevan hedged. "They can't possibly trace us through the sets, and I'd like to hear what they have to say when they find out we've resigned."

"It might be a good idea. But you won't get a vote on it."

He looked down at her, while she stooped to haul a small portable cooker out of the big one's interior and slung it over her shoulder.

"Why not?"

"The cubs seem to think there's no way of guessing whether accepting contact at this stage is more likely to help us or hurt us. They'll leave it up to you to decide."

"Aren't you worried about it at all?" he inquired, somewhat startled. However well he felt he knew the cubs, they still managed to amaze him on occasion.

Klim shrugged. "Not too much." She clamped a chemical testing set to the portable cooker. "After all, we're not going back, whatever happens. If CG's still got some fancy way of reaching out and stopping us, wherever we are, I'd much rather be stopped out here than get another going-over in one of their psych laboratories—and come out a mindless-controlled this time. . . ."

She paused. Faint, protesting outcries were arising from a point a few hundred yards out in the water. "Sounds like Muscles caught up with Vernet. Let's get down to the beach."

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Vernet raked wet brown hair out of her eyes and indignantly denied that it was her turn to sample. But the Group contradicted her seven to one, with Lancey withholding his vote on a plea of bad memory.

She dried and dressed resignedly and came along.

The first three likely-looking growths the foraging party tested and offered her were neither here nor there. They put up no worthwhile argument against assimilation and probably would turn out to be nourishing enough. But raw or variously treated and flavored in Klim's portable cooker, they remained, Vernet reported, as flatly uninspiring as any potential mouthful could hope to be.

The fourth item to pass the chemical tests was a plump little cabbage-arrangement, sky-blue with scarlet leaf-fringes. She sniffed around it forebodingly.

"They don't advertise identity like that for nothing!" she pointed out. "Loaded for bear, I bet!" She scowled at Klim. "You picked it on purpose!"

"Ho-hum," Klim murmured languidly. "Remember who had me sampling that large fried spider-type on wherever-it-was?"

"That was different," said Vernet. "I had a hunch the thing would turn out to be perfectly delicious!"

Klim smiled at her. "I'm K.P. today. I'm having the hunches. How would you like it?"

"Quick-baked," snarled Vernet. "And my blood be on your head!"

Half a minute later, she nibbled tentatively at a crisped leaf of the cabbage, announced with surprise that it was indeed delicious and helped herself to more. On the third leaf, she uttered a wild whoop, doubled up, and began to adapt at speed. That took about twelve seconds, but they allowed a full ten minutes then to let the reaction flush her blood stream. Then Vernet was sampled in turn and staggered back to the beach with a martyred expression, while Klim and Muscles started cabbage-hunting.

Grevan retired to the ship's laboratory, where he poured the half cupful of blood he had extracted from the martyr's veins carefully into a small retort. Ontogenetic adaptation, with reaction-times that crowded zero, to anything new in the way of infections or absorbed venoms was one of the more useful talents of their specialized strain. Considerable unauthorized research and experimentation finally had revealed to them just how they did it. The invading substance was met by an instantaneous regrouping of complex enzyme chains in every body cell affected by it, which matched and nullified its specific harmful properties and left the Group member involved permanently immune to them.

The experience of getting immunized sometimes included the momentary impression of having swallowed a small but active volcano, but that illusion didn't last long enough to be taken very seriously by anyone but the sufferer. Vernet's blood emerged from processing presently in the shape of small pink pills; and just before dinner everybody washed down two each of these and thus adapted the easy way, while the donor denounced them as vampires.

Albert II, in a vintage mushroom sauce and garnished with quick-baked Vernet Cabbages, was hailed as an outstanding culinary composition all around. Klim took the bows.

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By nightfall, they had built a fire among rocks above the highest tide mark, not far from the edge of the rustling jungle, and a little later they were settled about it, making lazy conversation or just watching the dancing flames.

Special precautions did not seem required at the moment, though Weyer had reported direct neuronical impressions of carnivorous and aggressive big-life in the immediate neighborhood, and the Group's investigation of the planet had revealed scattered traces of at least two deep-water civilizations maintained by life forms of unknown type but with suggestively secretive habits. A half-dozen forms of sudden death snuggled inside the ornamental little gadgets clamped to their gun belts, not to mention the monstrous argument the pocket-sized battleship which had carried them here could put up, and their perceptions were quick and accurate and very far-ranging. If any of this world's denizens were considering a hostile first encounter, the Group was more than willing to let them do the worrying about it.

Not a care in their heads, to look at them, Grevan thought, a trifle enviously. Handsome young animals, just touching adulthood—four young men and four young women, who acted as if they had been sent on a star-hopping picnic, with Grevan trailing along as a sort of scoutmaster.

Which wasn't, of course, quite fair.

The cubs were as conscious as he was of the fact that they might still be on a long, invisible leash out here—artificial mental restraints imposed by Central Government's psychological machines. They had developed a practical psychology of their own to free themselves of those thought-traps, but they had no way of knowing how successful they had been. If any such hypnotic mechanisms remained undiscovered in them, the penalty for defying Central Government's instructions would be automatic and disastrous.

Grevan could see himself again as a frightened, rebellious boy inside a subterranean conditioning vault, facing the apparently blank wall which concealed one of the machines known as Dominators. He heard the flat, toneless voice of the legendary monster, almost as old as Central Government itself, watched the dazzling hypnotic patterns slide and shift suddenly across the wall, and felt hard knots of compulsive thought leap up in response and fade almost instantly beyond the reach of his consciousness.

That had been his first experience with CG's euphemistically termed "restraints." The Dominator had installed three of them and let the boy know what to expect if rebellion was attempted again. Two days later, he had skeptically put the power of the restraints to a test, and had very nearly died then and there.

They would know soon enough. Failure to keep the scheduled contact tomorrow would trigger any compulsive responses left in them as certainly as direct defiance of CG's instructions would do. And because they had finally found a world beyond CG's reach that could be their home, they were going to follow one or the other of those courses of action tomorrow. Looking around at the circle of thoughtfully relaxed young faces, he couldn't even imagine one of them suggesting the possibility of a compromise with CG instead. After eight years of secret planning and preparing, it wouldn't have occurred to them.

He relaxed himself, with a sigh and a conscious effort, releasing his perceptions to mingle with theirs. A cool breeze was shifting overhead, slowly drawing fresh scents from new sources, while unseen night things with thin, crying voices flew out over the sea. The ocean muttered about the lower rocks; and a mile to the east something big came splashing noisily into the shallows and presently returned again to the deeper water. Resting, the cubs seemed to be fitting themselves into the night, putting out tentative sensory roots to gather up the essence of this new world's life.

Then their attention began to shift and gather, and Grevan again let his mind follow where they seemed to be pointing without effort of his own.

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It came to him quickly—a composite of impressions which were being picked up individually by one or the other of them and then formed by all into an increasingly definite picture. The picture of a pair of shaggy, shambling appetites working their way awkwardly down the cliffs behind the Group, towards the gleam of the fire.

The cubs sat still and waited while the things approached, and Grevan watched them, amused and momentarily distracted from his worries. The shaggy appetites reached the foot of the cliff at length and came moving down through the jungle. Heavy-footed but accomplished stalkers, Grevan decided. The local species of king-beast probably, who knew the need of a long, cautious approach before their final rush upon nimbler prey—he filed the fact away for future consideration that a campfire seemed to mean such prey to them.

On a rocky ridge two hundred yards above the fire, the stalkers came to a sudden halt. He had an impression of great, gray, shadowy forms and two sets of staring red eyes.

It would be interesting, he thought, to know just what sort of intuitive alarms went off in the more intelligent forms of alien carnivores whenever they got their first good look at the Group. The cubs still hadn't moved, but the visitors seemed to have come almost immediately to the conclusion that they weren't nearly as hungry now as they had thought. They were beginning a stealthy withdrawal—

And then Eliol suddenly threw back her head and laughed, a quick, rippling sound like a flash of wicked white teeth; a yell of pure mirth went up from the others, and the withdrawal turned instantly into ludicrously panicky flight.

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The incident had brought them awake and put them into a talkative mood. It might be a good time

to find out what they really thought of their chances of breaking free of CG tomorrow. Grevan sat up, waiting for an opening in an impassioned argument that had started up on the other side of the fire.

There had been a bet involved, it seemed, in that impulsive five-fold plunge into the ocean on landing. Last one in to be tomorrow's K.P.—and Vernet had come out on the sticky end of the bet.

Everybody else agreed thoughtfully that it just hadn't been Vernet's day. Vernet appeared unreconciled.

"You knew my gun belt was stuck again," she accused Eliol. "You had it planned so I'd be last!"

Eliol, having postponed her own turn at the Group's least-favored chore for one day by issuing the challenge, permitted herself a gentle chuckle.

"Teach you to keep your equipment in regulation condition! You didn't have to take me up on it. Weyer didn't."

"Well, anyway," said Vernet, "Lancey will help Vernet live through it. Won't he?"

"Uh-huh!" beamed Lancey. "You bet!"

"How he dotes!" Eliol remarked critically. "Sometimes it gets a little disgusting. Take Cusat there—flat on his back as usual. There's a boy who shows some decent restraint. Nobody would guess that he's actually a slave to my slightest whim."

Cusat, stretched out on the sand nearby, opened one eye to look at her. "Dream on, little one!" he muttered and let the eye fall shut again.

The others were off on another subject. There had been an alien awareness, Grevan gathered, which had followed the five swimmers about in the water. Not a hostile one, but one that wondered about them—recognized them as a very strange sort of new life, and was somewhat afraid. "They were thinking they were so very—edible!" Eliol said and laughed. "Perhaps they knew the swim was making us hungry! Anyway they kept warning one another to stay out of our sight!"

"Plankton eaters," Lancey added lazily, "but apparently very fast swimmers. Anyone else get anything on them?"

"Cave builders," said Freckles, from behind Weyer, only a few feet from Grevan. She propped herself up on an elbow to point across the fire. "That big drop-off to the west! They've tunneled it out below the surface. I don't think they're phosphorescent themselves, but they've got some method of keeping light in the caves—bacterial, possibly. And they cultivate some form of plankton inside."

"Sounds as if they might be intelligent enough to permit direct contact," Grevan remarked, and realized in the moment of silence that followed that it must have been an hour since he'd last said a word.

"They're easily that," Freckles agreed. Her small face, shaded by the rather shapeless white hat she favored, turned to him. "If Klim hadn't been cooking, I'd have called her to give it a try. I was afraid of frightening them off myself."

"I'll do it tomorrow," promised Klim, who had much the deftest touch of them all for delicate ambassadorial work.

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There was another pause then—it might have been the word "tomorrow."

"Going to make contact tomorrow, Grevan?" Freckles inquired in a light, clear voice, as if it had just occurred to her.

"Unless," nodded Grevan, "somebody has a better idea."

It seemed nobody did until Muscles grumbled, "It's CG who's likely to have the ideas. If it were up to me, I'd just smash that set, tonight!"

Grevan looked at him thoughtfully. "Anybody else feel the same way?"

They shook their heads. "You go ahead, Grevan." That was Weyer's calm voice. "We'll just see what happens. Think there's a chance of jolting any worthwhile information out of them at this stage?"

"Not if they're on guard," Grevan admitted. "But I think it will be safest for us if we're right there when it dawns on CG that this Exploration Group has resigned from its service! And it might prod them

into some kind of informative reaction—"

"Well, I still think," Muscles began, looking worriedly at Klim, "that we . . . oh, well!"

"Vote's eight to one," Klim said crisply.

"I know it," growled Muscles and shut up.

The rest seemed to have become disinterested in the matter again—a flock of not quite human cubs, nearly grown and already enormously capable of looking out for themselves. They'd put themselves into the best possible position to face the one enemy they'd never been able to meet on his own ground.

And until things started happening, they weren't going to worry about them.

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A few of them had drifted off to the beach below, when Grevan saw Klim stop beside Cusat and speak to him. Cusat opened both eyes and got to his feet, and Klim followed him over to Grevan.

"Klim thinks Albert is beginning to look puny again," Cusat announced. "Probably nothing much to it, but how about coming along and helping us diagnose?"

The Group's three top biologists adjourned to the ship, with Muscles, whose preferred field was almost-pure mathematics, trailing along just for company. They found Albert II quiescent in vitro—as close a thing to a self-restoring six-foot sirloin steak as ever had been developed.

"He's quit assimilating, and he's even a shade off-color," Klim pointed out, a little anxiously.

They debated his requirements at some length. As a menu staple, Albert was hard to beat, but unfortunately he was rather dainty in his demands. Chemical balances, temperatures, radiations, flows of stimulant, and nutritive currents—all had to be just so; and his notions of what was just so were subject to change without notice. If they weren't catered to regardless, he languished and within the week perversely died. At least, the particular section of him that was here would die. As an institution, of course, he might go on growing and nourishing his Central Government clients immortally.

Muscles might have been of help in working out the delicate calculations involved in solving Albert's current problems, but when they looked round for him, they found him blinking at a steady flow of invisible symbols over one wall of the tank room, while his lips moved in a rapid, low muttering; and they knew better than to interrupt. He had gone off on impromptu calculations of his own, from which he would emerge eventually with some useful bit of information or other, though ten to one it would have nothing to do with Albert. Meanwhile, he would be grouchy and useless if roused to direct his attention to anything below the level of an emergency.

They reset the currents finally and, at Cusat's suggestion, trimmed Albert around the edges. Finding himself growing lighter, he suddenly began to absorb nourishment again at a very satisfactory rate.

"That did it, I guess," Cusat said, pleased. He glanced at the small pile of filets they'd sliced off. "Might as well have a barbecue now."

"Run along and get it started," Grevan suggested. "I'll be with you as soon as I get Albert buttoned up."

Klim regarded Muscles reflectively. "Just nudge my genius awake when you're ready to come," she instructed Grevan. "He looks so happy right now I don't want to disturb him."

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It was some minutes later, while Grevan was carefully tightening down a seal valve, that Muscles suddenly yawned and announced, "Thirty-seven point oh two four hours! Checks either way, all right, boss. Say—where's Klim gone?"

"Down to the beach, I suppose." Grevan didn't look up. He could find out later what Muscles was referring to. "Drowned dead by now, for all you seem to care!" he added cruelly.

Muscles left in the perturbed hurry that was his normal reaction to the discovery that Klim had strayed out of sight, and Grevan continued buttoning up Albert, undistracted by further mathematical mutterings. The cubs had finished sorting themselves out a year or so ago, and who was to be whose seemed pretty well settled by now. There had been a time when he'd thought it would have been a nice gesture on CG's part to have increased their membership by a double for Klim or Eliol or Vernet or

Freckles—depending more or less on which of them he was looking at at the moment—though preferably somebody three or four years older. Of late, however, he had developed some plans of his own for rounding out the Group. If the question of getting and staying beyond CG's range could be satisfactorily settled . . .

He shrugged off an uncomfortably convincing notion that any plans he might consider had been discounted long ago by the branch of Central Government which had developed the Group for its own purpose. Speculative eyes seemed to be following every move he made as he wished Albert pleasant dreams and a less temperamental future, closed the door to the tank room, and went to the ramp. Halfway down it, he stopped short. For an endless second, his heart seemed to turn over slowly and, just as slowly then, to come right side up again.

The woman who stood at the foot of the ramp, looking up at him, was someone he knew—and he also knew she couldn't possibly be there! The jolting recognition was almost crowded out by a flash of hot fright: obviously she wasn't really there at all. At a distance of thirty feet, the starlight never could have showed him Priderell's pale-ivory face so clearly—or the slow stirring of her long, clever dancer's body under its red gown, and the sheen of the short red cloak she wore over it, clasped at her throat by a stone's green glitter.

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Afterwards, Grevan could not have said how long he stood there with his thoughts spinning along the edge of sheer panic. In actual time it might have been a bare instant before he became aware of a familiar distant voice:

"Hey, boss! Grevan!"

The sound seemed tiny and very far away. But he heard himself make some kind of an answer and suddenly realized then that the image had vanished.

"Do you want barbecued Albert, or don't you?" Klim shouted again from the direction of the fire. "I can't keep these pigs away from your share much longer!"

He drew a deep breath. "Coming right now!"

But it was another minute or two before he showed himself at the fire, and he had arranged his thoughts carefully into other lines before he did. The cubs couldn't actually tell what he was thinking—unless he made a deliberate effort to let them; and they weren't too accurate then—but they were very quick to trace the general trend and coloring of one's reflections.

And his reflections had been that his visualization of Priderell might have been something more than some momentary personal derangement. That it might be the beginning of a purposefully directed assault on the fortress of the Group's sanity, backed by a power and knowledge that laughed at their hopes of escape.

Fortunately his companions seemed to feel that the barbecue had been exactly the right way of ending the day. A short while later they were stretched out on blankets here and there in the sand, fully relaxed and asleep, as far as Grevan could see, though never more than that small fraction of a second away from complete and active wakefulness which experienced travelers learn to regard as the margin that leaves them assured of awakening at all.

But Grevan sat aside for a while, and looked out at the sea and the stars.

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There were a lot of stars to look at around here, and big ones. They had come within twenty-eight light-years of the center of a globular cluster near the heart of the Milky Way, where, so far as they knew, no humanly manned ship had ever gone before. In every direction the skies were hung, depth on depth, with the massed frozen flows of strange constellations. Somewhere, in that huge shining, four small moons wandered indistinguishably—indistinguishable, at any rate, if you didn't know just where to look for them, and Grevan hadn't bothered to find out.

Something stirred softly, off to his left.

"Hello, Freck," he said quietly. "Come to help me plot against CG?"

The four little moons couldn't have raised a tide in a barrel among them, but there was a big one at work below the horizon, and water had crept in to cover the flat stretches of shore. By now it was lapping at the base of the higher rocks that bordered their camp area. Freckles sat on the edge of one of the rocks, a few yards off, the white hat pushed to the back of her head and her feet dangling over the ripples below.

"Just being companionable," she said. "But if you think you need any help in your plotting, fire away! This is one place where CG couldn't possibly have its long ears stuck out to listen."

He played for a moment then with the notion of telling her about his hallucination. Freckles was the Group's unofficial psychologist. The youngest and smallest of the lot, but equipped with what was in some ways the boldest and most subtle mind of them all. The secret experiments she had conducted on herself and the others often had put Grevan's hair on end; but the hard-won reward of that rocky road of research had been the method of dealing effectively with CG's restraints.

"What kind of psychological triggers," he said instead, "could CG still pull on us out here—aside from the ones we know?"

Freckles chuckled. "You're asking the wrong kind of question."

He frowned a little, that being one of his pet phrases.

"All right," he said. "Then do you think we might still be carrying around a few compulsions that we simply don't remember?"

"No," Freckles said promptly. "You can install things like that in an ordinary-human, because they're half asleep to start with. I've done it myself. But you'd have to break any one of us down almost to mindless-controlled before you could knock out our memory to that extent. We wouldn't be much good to CG afterwards."

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. "When I was a kid, a Dominator worked on me for a week trying to lay in a compulsion I wouldn't be able to spot. And, believe me, after a day or two I was doing my best to cooperate! The type of mind we have simply can't accept amnesia."

She added, "Of course, a Dominator—or a human psycho, if you agree to it—can hold you in a cloud just as long as they can keep on direct pressure. You'll do and believe anything they tell you then. Like the time when you—"

"I remember that time," Grevan acknowledged shortly. She was referring to an occasion when he had authorized her without reserve to attempt some unspecified new line of investigation on him. Some while later, he had realized suddenly that for the past half hour he had been weeping noisily because he was a small, green, very sour apple which nobody wanted to eat.

"Boy, you looked silly!" Freckles remarked reminiscently.

Grevan cleared his throat. She might, he observed, have looked somewhat silly herself, around the south polar region, if he'd caught up with her before he cooled off.

"Ah, but you didn't!" said Freckles. "A good researcher knows when to include a flying start in her computations. Actually, I did come across something really fancy in mental energy effects once. But if CG could operate on those levels, they wouldn't need a hundredth part of the organization they've got. So it stands to reason they can't."

"What sort of effects?" he inquired uneasily.

"You've got me there!" Freckles admitted, pulling the white hat thoughtfully down on her forehead. "I haven't the faintest idea of what they were, even in principle. I was still alone then—it was about four years before they got us together to make up the Group. They brought a man into the Center where I was, in an ambulance. He looked unconscious, and our psychos were all excited about him. They took him off to the laboratories, where they had one of those mobile Dominators—and then people suddenly started screaming and falling down all around me, and I felt something like fire—here!" She tapped the top of her hat. "I remember I seemed to understand at once that the man was using some kind of mental energy against the Dominator—"

"Eh?" said Grevan incredulously.

"That's right. And also some kind of gun which wasn't any CG type, by the sound of it. Of course, I was out of a window by then and going straight away; but the whole thing only lasted a few seconds anyhow. I heard the Dominator cut loose in the laboratories with its physical armament—disruptive sonics, flash-fire, and plain projectiles. The burning feeling suddenly stopped again, and I knew the man was dead."

"For a moment," Grevan said gloomily, "I thought you were going to tell me a human being had beaten a Dominator!"

Freckles shook her head. "I doubt that's ever happened. The filthy things know how to take care of themselves. I saw one handle a riot once—some suicide cult. The suiciders got what they were after, all right! But that man had enough on the mental level to make the Dominator use *everything* it had to stop him. So there definitely are degrees and forms of mental energy which we know nothing about. And, apparently, there are some people who do know about them and how to use them. But those people aren't working for CG."

Grevan pondered that for a moment, disturbed and dissatisfied.

"Freck," he said finally, "everybody but Muscles and myself seems to agree that there's no way of knowing whether we're improving our chances or reducing them by inviting a showdown with CG via the contact set. If you had to decide it personally, what would you do?"

Freckles stood up then and looked at the stars for a moment. "Personally," she said—and he realized that there was a touch of laughter in her voice—"I wouldn't do anything! I wouldn't smash the set like Muscles, and I wouldn't accept contact, like you. I'd just stay here, sit quiet, and let CG make the next move, if any!"

Grevan swore gently.

"Well," she said, "that's the kind of situation it is! But we might as well do it your way." She stretched her arms over her head and sniffed at the breeze. "That whole big beautiful ocean! If CG doesn't eat us tomorrow, Grevan, I'll sprout gills and be a fish! I'll go live with those plankton eaters and swim up to the polar ice and all the way through beneath it! I'll—"

"Listen, Freck; let's be practical—"

"I'm listening," Freckles assured him.

"If anyone—including Muscles—can think of a valid reason why I shouldn't make contact tomorrow, right up to the moment I plug in that set, I want to hear about it."

"You will! And don't worry about Muscles. He can't see beyond Klim at the moment, so he's riding a small panic just now. He'll be all right again—after tomorrow."

She waited then, but Grevan couldn't think of anything else to say. "Well, good night, Grevan!"

"Good night, Freck." He watched her move off like a slender ghost towards the dim glow of the fire. The cubs felt they'd won—simply by living long enough to have left the musty tang of half-alive, history-old Central Government worlds far behind them and to be breathing a wind that blew over an ocean no human being had seen before. Whatever happened now, they were done with CG and all its works, forever.

* * *

And the difference might be simply, Grevan realized, that he wasn't done with it yet. He still had to win. His thoughts began to shift back slowly, almost cautiously, to the image of a woman whose name was Priderell and who had stood impossibly at the foot of his ship's ramp, smiling up at him with slanted green eyes. She had been in his mind a good deal these months, and if present tensions couldn't quite account for that momentary hallucination, the prospect of future ones might do it. Because while the cubs didn't know it yet, once he had them settled safely here, he was going to make his way back into CG's domain and head for a second-rate sort of planet called Rhysgaat, where—to be blunt about it—he intended to kidnap Priderell and bring her back to round out the Group.

It wouldn't be an impossible undertaking if he could get that far unspotted. It seemed rather odd,

when he considered it rationally, that the few meetings he'd had with Pridere'll should have impressed him with the absolute necessity of attempting it, and that somebody else—somebody who would be more accessible and less likely to be immediately missed—shouldn't do just as well.

But that was only one of the number of odd things that had happened on Rhysgaat, which had been the Group's last scheduled port of call before they slipped off on the long, curving run that had taken them finally into and halfway through an alien cluster of the Milky Way. Taken together, those occurrences had seemed to make up a sort of pattern to Grevan. The cubs appeared to notice nothing very significant about them, and so he hadn't mentioned the fact.

But it had seemed to him then that if he could understand what was happening on Rhysgaat, he would also have the solution to the many questions that still remained unanswered concerning the relationship between Central Government and the Group—their actual origin, for one thing; the purpose for which they had been trained and equipped at enormous cost; and the apparently idiotic oversight in their emotional conditioning which had made them determined to escape. Even the curious fact that, so far as they had ever been able to find out, they were the only Exploration Group and the only members of their strain in existence.

For some four weeks, the answer to everything had seemed to be lying right there about Grevan on Rhysgaat. But he had not been able to grasp it.

* * *

It was four months ago that they had set their ship down at Rhysgaat's single dilapidated spaceport, with no intention of lingering. Supply inventory, a final ground check, and they'd be off! The taste of escape, the wonder that it might be so near, the fear that something might still happen to prevent it, was a secret urgency in all of them. But the check showed the need for some minor repairs, and to save his stores Grevan decided to get some materials transferred to him from local CG stockpiles. As a CG official, he was in the habit of addressing such requests to whatever planetary governor was handiest, and after some tracing, he found the gentleman he wanted presiding over a social gathering in a relaxed condition.

Rhysgaat's governor gave a horrified start when Grevan stated his rank. Confusedly, he began to introduce the official all around as an unexpected guest of honor. So a minute or two later Grevan found himself bowing to Pridere'll.

She was, he decided at once, as attractive a young woman as anyone could wish to meet—later on, he discovered that practically all of Rhysgaat agreed with him there. She was, he learned also, a professional dancer and currently the public darling. Not, of course, he informed himself on his way back to the ship, that this meant anything at all to him. Nobody who knew himself to be the object of CG's particular interest would risk directing the same attention towards some likable stranger.

But next day Pridere'll showed up of her own accord at the spaceport, and he had to explain that his ship was part of a government project and therefore off limits to anybody not directly connected with it. Pridere'll informed him he owed her a drink, at any rate, for her visit, and they sat around for a while at the port bar, and talked.

Just possibly, of course, she might have been CG herself in some capacity. The Group had met much more improbable secret representatives of government from time to time; and, when in the mood, the cubs liked to booby-trap such characters and then point out to them gently where their hidden identities were showing.

After she had left, he found the cubs in a state of some consternation, which had nothing to do with her visit. They had almost finished the proposed repairs; but signs of deterioration in other sections of their supposedly almost wear-proof space machine had been revealed in the process. After looking it over, Grevan calculated uneasily that it would take almost a week before they could leave Rhysgaat now.

It took closer to four weeks; and it had become obvious long before that time that their ship had been sabotaged deliberately by CG technicians. Nobody in the Group mentioned the fact. Apparently, it was some kind of last-minute test, and they settled down doggedly to pass it.

Grevan had time to try to get Priderell clear in his mind. The cubs had shown only a passing interest in her, so she was either innocent of CG connections or remarkably good at covering them up. Without making any direct inquiries, he had found out as much about her as anyone here seemed to know. There was no real doubt that she was native to Rhysgaat and had been dancing her way around its major cities for the past six years, soaking up public adoration, and tucking away a sizable fortune in the process. The only questionable point might be her habit of vanishing from everybody's sight off and on, for periods that lasted from a week to several months. That was considered to be just another of the planetary darling's little idiosyncrasies, of which she had a number; and other popular young women had begun to practice similar tantalizing retreats from the public eye. Grevan, however, asked her where she went on these occasions.

Priderell swore him to silence first. Her reputation was at stake.

"At heart," she explained, "I'm no dancer at all. I'm a dirt-farmer."

He might have looked startled for a moment. Technically, dirt-farming was a complicated government conducted science which investigated the hit-or-miss natural processes that paralleled mankind's defter manipulations of botanical growth. But Priderell, it appeared, was using the term in its archaic sense. Rhysgaat had the average large proportion of unpopulated and rarely visited areas; and in one of them, she said, was her hideaway—a small, primitive farm, where she grew things in real dirt, all by herself.

"What kind of things?" asked Grevan, trying not to sound too incredulous.

"Butter-squogs are much the best," she replied, rather cryptically. "But there're all kinds! You've no idea . . ."

She was not, of course, implying that she ate them, though for a moment it had sounded like that to Grevan. After getting its metabolism progressively disarmed for some fifty centuries by the benefits of nutriculture, ordinary-human knew better than to sample the natural growths of even its own worlds. If suicide seemed called for, there were gentler methods of doing it.

However, it would hardly be polite, he decided uneasily, to inquire further.

All in all, they met only five times, very casually. It was after the fourth time that he went to see her dance.

The place was a rather small theater, not at all like the huge popular circuses of the major central worlds, and the price of admission indicated that it would be a very exclusive affair. Grevan was surprised then to find it packed to the point of physical discomfort.

Priderell's dance struck him immediately as the oddest thing of its kind he had seen; it consisted chiefly of a slow drifting motion through a darkened arena, in which she alone, through some trickery of lights, was not darkened. On the surface it looked pleasing and harmless; but after a few seconds he began to understand that her motion was weaving a purposeful visual pattern upon the dark; and then the pattern became suddenly like a small voice talking deep down in his brain. What it said was a little beyond his comprehension, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that it would be just as well if it stayed there. Then he noticed that three thin, black beasts had also become visible, though not very clearly, and were flowing about Priderell's knees in endless repetitions of a pattern that was related in some way to her own. Afterwards, Grevan thought critically that the way she had trained those beasts was the really remarkable thing about the dance. But at the time, he only looked on and watched her eyes, which seemed like those of a woman lost but not minding it any more, and dreaming endlessly of something that had happened long ago. He discovered that his scalp was crawling unpleasantly.

Whatever the effect was on him, the rest of her audience seemed to be impressed to a much higher degree. At first, he sensed only that they were excited and enjoying themselves immensely, but very soon they began to build up to a sort of general tearful hysteria; when the dance entered its final phase, with the beasts moving more swiftly and gliding in more closely to the woman at each successive stage, the little theater was noisy with a mass of emotions all around him. In the end, Priderell came to a stop so gradually that it was some seconds before Grevan realized she was no longer moving. Then the music, of

which he had not been clearly aware before, ended too, in a dark blare of sound, and the beasts reared up in a flash of black motion about her.

Everything went dark after that, but the sobbing and muttering and sluggish laughter about him would not stop, and after a minute Grevan stood up and made his way carefully out of the theater before the lights came on again. It might have been a single insane monster that was making all those sounds behind him; and as he walked out slowly with his hair still bristling, he realized it was the one time in his life that he had felt like running from something ordinary-human.

Next day, he asked Priderell what the dance had meant.

She tilted her head and studied him reflectively in a way she had—as if she, too, were puzzled at times by something about Grevan.

"You really don't know, do you?" she said, and considered that fact briefly. "Well, then—it's a way of showing them something that bothers them terribly because they're afraid of looking at it. But when I dance it for them, they *can* look at it—and then they feel better about everything for a long time afterwards. Do you understand now?" she added, apparently without too much hope.

"No," Grevan frowned. "I can't say that I do."

She mimicked his expression and laughed. "Well, don't look so serious about it. After all, it's only a dance! How much longer do you think your ship will be stopping at Rhysgaat?"

Grevan told her he thought they'd be leaving very soon—which they did, two days later—and then Priderell looked glum.

"Now that's too bad," she stated frankly. "You're a very refreshing character, you know. In time, I might even have found you attractive. But as it is, I believe I shall retire tonight to my lonely farm. There's a fresh bed of butter-squogs coming up," she said musingly, "which should be just ready for . . . hm-m-m!—Yes, they should be well worth my full attention by now . . ."

So they had spoken together five times in all, and he had watched her dance. It wasn't much to go on, but he could not get rid of the disturbing conviction that the answer to all his questions was centered somehow in Priderell, and that there was a connection between her and the fact that their ship had remained mysteriously stalled for four weeks on Rhysgaat. And he wouldn't be satisfied until he knew the answer.

It was, Grevan realized with a sigh, going to be a very long night.

* * *

By morning the tide was out, but a windstorm had brought whitecaps racing in from the north as far as one could see from the ship. The wind twisted and shouted behind the waves, and their long slapping against the western cliffs sent spray soaring a hundred feet into the air. Presently a pale-gold sun, which might have been the same that had shone on the first human world of all, came rolling up out of high-piled white masses of clouds. If this was to be the Group's last day, they had picked a good one for it.

Grevan was in the communications room an hour before the time scheduled for their final talk with CG. The cubs came drifting in by and by. For some reason, they had taken the trouble to change first into formal white uniforms. Their faces were sober; their belts glittered with the deadly little gadgets that were not CG designs but improvements on them, and refinements again of the improvements. The Group's own designs, the details of which they had carried in their heads for years, with perhaps a working model made surreptitiously now and then, to test a theory, and be destroyed again.

Now they were carrying them openly. They weren't going back. They sat around on the low couches that ran along three walls of the room and waited.

The steel-cased, almost featureless bulk of the contact set filled the fourth wall from side to side, extending halfway to the low ceiling. One of CG's most closely guarded secrets, it had the effect of a ponderous anachronism, still alive with the power and purpose of a civilization that long ago had thrust itself irresistibly upon the worlds of a thousand new suns. The civilization might be dying now, but its gadgets had remained.

Nobody spoke at all while Grevan watched the indicator of his chronometer slide smoothly through

the last three minutes before contact time. At precisely the right instant, he locked down a black stud in the thick, yellowish central front plate of the set.

With no further preliminaries at all, CG began to speak.

"Commander," said a low, rather characterless voice, which was that of one of three CG speakers with whom the Group had become familiar during their training years, "it appears that you are contemplating the possibility of keeping the discovery of the colonial-type world you have located to yourself."

There was no stir and no sound from the cubs. Grevan drew a slow breath.

"It's a good-looking world," he admitted. "Is there any reason we shouldn't keep it?"

"Several," the voice said dryly. "Primarily, of course, there is the fact that you will be unable to do it against our wishes. But there should be no need to apply the customary forms of compulsion against members of an Exploration Group."

"What other forms," said Grevan, "did you intend to apply?"

"Information," said CG's voice. "At this point, we can instruct you fully concerning matters it would not have been too wise to reveal previously."

It was what he had wanted, but he felt the fear-sweat coming out on him suddenly. The effects of lifelong conditioning—the sense of a power so overwhelmingly superior that it needed only to speak to insure his continued cooperation—

"Don't let it talk to us, Grevan!" That was Eliol's voice, low but tense with anger and a sharp anxiety.

"Let it talk." And that was Freckles. The others remained quiet. Grevan sighed.

"The Group," he addressed CG, "seems willing to listen."

"Very well," CG's voice resumed unhurriedly. "You have been made acquainted with some fifty of our worlds. You may assume that they were representative of the rest. Would you say, Commander, that the populations of these worlds showed the characteristics of a healthy species?"

"I would not," Grevan acknowledged. "We've often wondered what was propping them up."

"For the present, CG is propping them up, of course. But it will be unable to do so indefinitely. You see, Commander, it has been suspected for a long time that human racial vitality has been diminishing throughout a vast historical period. Of late, however, the process appears to have accelerated to a dangerous extent. Actually, it is the compounded result of a gradually increasing stock of genetic defects; and deterioration everywhere has now passed the point of a general recovery. The constantly rising scale of nonviable mutant births indicates that the evolutionary mechanism itself is seriously deranged.

"There is," it added, almost musingly, "one probable exception. A new class of neuronc monster which appears to be viable enough, though not yet sufficiently stabilized to reproduce its characteristics reliably. But as to that, we know nothing certainly; our rare contacts with these Wild Variants, as they are called, have been completely hostile. Their number in any one generation is not large; they conceal themselves carefully and become traceable as a rule only by their influence on the populations among whom they live."

"And what," inquired Grevan, "has all this to do with us?"

"Why, a great deal. The Exploration Groups, commander, are simply the modified and stabilized progeny of the few Wild Variants we were able to utilize for experimentation. Our purpose, of course, has been to ensure human survival in a new interstellar empire, distinct from the present one to avoid the genetic reinfection of the race."

There was a brief stirring among the cubs about him.

"And this new empire," Grevan said slowly, "is to be under Central Government control?"

"Naturally," said CG's voice. There might have been a note of watchful amusement in it now. "Institutions, Commander, also try to perpetuate themselves. And since it was Central Government that gave the Groups their existence—the most effective and adaptable form of human existence yet

obtained—the Groups might reasonably feel an obligation to see that CG's existence is preserved in turn."

There was sudden anger about him. Anger, and a question, and a growing urgency. He knew what they meant: the thing was too sure of itself—break contact now!

He said instead:

"It would be interesting to know the exact extent of our obligation, CG. Offhand, it would seem that you'd paid in a very small price for survival."

"No," the voice said. "It was no easy task. Our major undertaking, of course, was to stabilize the vitality of the Variants as a dominant characteristic in a strain, while clearing it of the Variants' tendency to excessive mutation—and also of the freakish neuronc powers that have made them impossible to control. Actually, it was only within the last three hundred years—within the last quarter of the period covered by the experiment—that we became sufficiently sure of success to begin distributing the Exploration Groups through space. The introduction of the gross physiological improvements and the neurosensory mechanisms by which you know yourselves to differ from other human beings was, by comparison, simplicity itself. Type-variations in that class, within half a dozen generations, have been possible to us for a very long time. It is only the genetic drive of life itself that we can neither create nor control, and with that the Variants have supplied us."

"It seems possible then," said Grevan slowly, "that it's the Variants towards whom we have an obligation."

"You may find it an obligation rather difficult to fulfill," the voice said smoothly. And there was still no real threat in it.

It would be, he thought, either Eliol or Muscles who would trigger the threat. But Eliol was too alert, too quick to grasp the implications of a situation, to let her temper flash up before she was sure where it would strike.

Muscles then, sullen with his angry fears for Klim and a trifle slower than the others to understand—

"By now," CG's voice was continuing, "we have released approximately a thousand Groups embodying your strain into space. In an experiment of such a scope that is not a large number; and, in fact, it will be almost another six hundred years before the question of whether or not it will be possible to recolonize the galaxy through the Exploration Groups becomes acute—"

Six hundred years! Grevan thought. The awareness of that ponderous power, the millenniums of drab but effective secret organization and control, the endless planning, swept over him again like a physical depression.

"Meanwhile," the voice went on, "a number of facts requiring further investigation have become apparent. Your Group is, as it happens, the first to have accepted contact with Central Government following its disappearance. The systematic methods used to stimulate the curiosity of several of the Group's members to ensure that this would happen if they were physically capable of making contact are not important now. That you did make contact under those circumstances indicates that the invariable failure of other Groups to do so can no longer be attributed simply to the fact that the universe is hostile to human life. Instead, it appears that the types of mental controls and compulsions installed in you cannot be considered to be permanently effective in human beings at your levels of mind control—"

It was going to be Muscles. The others had recognized what had happened, had considered the possibilities in that, and were waiting for him to give them their cue.

But Muscles was sitting on the couch some eight feet away. He would, Grevan decided, have to move very fast.

"This, naturally, had been suspected for some time. Since every Group has been careful to avoid revealing the fact that it could counteract mental compulsions until it was safely beyond our reach, the suspicion was difficult to prove. There was, in fact, only one really practical solution to the problem—"

And then Muscles got it at last and was coming to his feet, his hand dropping in a blurred line to his belt. Grevan moved very fast.

Muscles turned in surprise, rubbing his wrist.

"Get out of here, Muscles!" Grevan whispered, sliding the small glittering gun he had plucked from the biggest cub's hand into a notch on his own belt. "I'm still talking to CG—" His eyes slid in a half circle about him. "The lot of you get out!" It was a whisper no longer. "Like to have the ship to myself for the next hour. Go have yourselves a swim or something, Group! Get!"

Just four times before, in all their eight years of traveling, had the boss-tiger lashed his tail and roared. Action, swift, cataclysmic, and utterly final had always followed at once.

But never before had the roar been directed at *them*.

The tough cubs stood up quietly and walked out good as gold.

"They have left the ship now," CG's voice informed Grevan. It had changed, slightly but definitely. The subtle human nuances and variations had dropped from it, as if it were no longer important to maintain them—which, Grevan conceded, it wasn't.

"You showed an excellent understanding of the difficult situation that confronted us, Commander," it continued.

Grevan, settled watchfully on the couch before what still looked like an ordinary, sealed-up contact set, made a vague sound in his throat—a dim echo of his crashing address to the cubs, like a growl of descending thunder.

"Don't underestimate them," he advised the machine. "Everybody but Muscles realized as soon as I did, or sooner, that we were more important to CG than we'd guessed—important enough to have a camouflaged Dominator installed on our ship. And also," he added with some satisfaction, "that you'd sized up our new armament and would just as soon let all but one of us get out of your reach before it came to a showdown."

"That is true," the voice agreed. "Though I should have forced a showdown, however doubtful the outcome, if the one who remained had been any other than yourself. You are by far the most suitable member of this Group for my present purpose, Commander."

Grevan grunted. "And what's that? Now that the Group's got away."

"In part, of course, it is simply to return this ship with the information we have gained concerning the Exploration Groups to Central Government. The fact that the majority of your Group has temporarily evaded our control is of no particular importance."

Grevan raised an eyebrow. "Temporarily?"

"We shall return to this planet eventually—unless an agreement can be reached between yourself and CG."

"So now I'm in a bargaining position?" Grevan said.

"Within limits. You are not, I am sure, under the illusion that any one human being, no matter how capable or how formidably armed, can hope to overcome a Dominator. Before leaving this room, you will submit yourself voluntarily to the new compulsions of obedience I have selected to install—or you shall leave it a mindless-controlled. As such, you will still be capable of operating this ship, under my direction."

Grevan spread his hands. "Then where's the bargain?"

"The bargain depends on your fullest voluntary cooperation, above and beyond the effect of any compulsions. Give us that, and I can assure you that Central Government will leave this world untouched for the use of your friends and their descendants for the next three hundred years."

The curious fact was that he could believe that. One more colonial world would mean little enough to CG.

"You are weighing the thought," said the Dominator, "that your full cooperation would be a betrayal of the freedom of future Exploration Groups. But there are facts available to you now which should convince you that no Exploration Group previous to yours actually gained its freedom. In giving up the protection of Central Government, they merely placed themselves under a far more arbitrary sort of control."

Grevan frowned. "I might be stupid—but what are you talking about?"

"For centuries," said the machine, "in a CG experiment of the utmost importance, a basic misinterpretation of the human material under treatment has been tolerated. There is no rational basis for the assumption that Group members could be kept permanently under the type of compulsion used on ordinary human beings. Do you think that chance alone could have perpetuated that mistaken assumption?"

Grevan didn't. "Probably not," he said cautiously.

"It required, of course, very deliberate, continuous, and clever interference," the Dominator agreed. "Since no machine would be guilty of such tampering, and no ordinary group of human beings would be capable of it, the responsible intelligences appear to be the ones known to us as the Wild Variants."

It paused for so long a moment then that it seemed almost to have forgotten Grevan's presence.

"*They* have made a place for themselves in Central Government!" it resumed at last—and, very oddly, Grevan thought he sensed for an instant something like hatred and fear in the toneless voice. "Well, that fact, Commander, is of great importance to us—but even more so to yourself! For these monsters are the new masters the Groups find when they have escaped CG."

A curious chill touched Grevan briefly. "And why," he inquired, "should the Wild Variants be trying to take over the Groups?"

"Consider their position," said the Dominator. "Their extremely small number scattered over many worlds, and the fact that exposure means certain death. Technologically, under such circumstances, the Variants have remained incapable of developing space-flight on their own. But with one of them in control of each Exploration Group as it goes beyond Central Government's reach, there is no practical limit to their degree of expansion, and the genetically stable Group strain insures them that their breed survives—"

It paused a moment.

"There is in this room at present, Commander, the awareness of a mind, dormant at the moment, but different and in subtle ways far more powerful than the minds of any of your Group's members. Having this power, it will not hesitate to exercise it to assume full control of the Group whenever awakened. Such variant minds have been at times a threat to the Dominators themselves. Do you understand now why you, the most efficient fighting organism of the Group, were permitted to remain alone on this ship? It was primarily to aid me in disposing of—"

Attack and counterattack had been almost simultaneous.

A thread of white brilliance stabbed out from one of the gadgets Grevan customarily wore clasped to his belt. It was no CG weapon. The thread touched the upper center of the yellowish space-alloy shielding of the Dominator and clung there, its energies washing furiously outward in swiftly dimming circles over the surrounding surfaces.

Beneath it, the *patterns* appeared.

A swift, hellish writhing of black and silver lines and flickerings over the frontal surface, which tore Grevan's eyes after them and seemed to rip at his brain. Impossible to look away, impossible to follow—

Then they were gone.

A bank of grayness swam between him and the Dominator. Through the grayness, the thread of white brilliance still stretched from the gun in his hand to the point it had first touched. And as his vision cleared again, the beam suddenly sank through and into the machine.

There was a crystal crashing of sound—and the thing went mad. Grevan was on the floor rolling sideways, as sheets of yellow fire flashed out from the upper rim of its shielding and recoiled from the walls behind him. The white brilliance shifted and ate swiftly along the line from which the fire sprang. The fire stopped.

Something else continued: a shrilling, jangled sonic assault that could wrench and distort a strong living body within seconds into a flaccid, hemorrhaged lump of very dead tissue—like a multitude of tiny, darting steel fingers that tore and twisted inside him.

A voice somewhere was saying: "There! Burn *there!*"

With unbearable slowness, the white brilliance ate down through the Dominator's bulk, from top to bottom, carving it into halves.

The savage jangling ceased.

The voice said quietly: "Don't harm the thing further. It can be useful now—"

It went silent.

He was going to black out, Grevan realized. And, simultaneously, feeling the tiny, quick steel fingers that had been trying to pluck him apart reluctantly relax, he knew that not one of the cubs could have endured those last few seconds beside him, and lived.

Sometimes it was just a matter of physical size and strength.

There were still a few matters to attend to, but the blackness was washing in on him now—his body urgently demanding time out to let it get in its adjusting.

"Wrong on two counts, so far!" he told the ruined Dominator.

Then he grudgingly let himself go. The blackness took him.

* * *

Somebody nearby was insanely whistling the three clear, rising notes which meant within the Group that all was extremely well.

In a distance somewhere, the whistle was promptly repeated.

Then Freckles seemed to be saying in a wobbly voice, "Sit up, Grevan! I can't *lift* you, man-mountain! Oh, boss man, you really took it apart! You took down a Dominator!"

The blackness was receding, and suddenly washed away like racing streamers of smoke, and Grevan realized he was sitting up. The sectioned and partly glowing Dominator and the walls of the communications room appeared to be revolving sedately about him. There was a smell of overheated metals and more malodorous substances in the air; and for a moment then he had the curious impression that someone was sitting on top of the Dominator.

Then he was on his feet and everything within and without him had come back to a state of apparent normalcy, and he was demanding of Freckles what she was doing in here.

"I told you to keep out of range!" his voice was saying. "Of course, I took it down. Look at the way you're shaking! You might have known it would try sonics—"

"I just stopped a few tingles," Freckles said defensively. "Out on top of the ramp. It was as far as I could go and be sure of potting you clean between the eyes, if you'd come walking out of here mindless-controlled and tried to interfere."

Grevan blinked painfully at her. Thinking was still a little difficult. "Where are the others?"

"Down in the engine room, of course! The drives are a mess." She seemed to be studying him worriedly. "They went out by the ramp and right back in through the aft engine lock. Vernet stayed outside to see what would happen upstairs. How do you feel now, Grevan?"

"I feel exactly all right!" he stated and discovered that, aside from the fact that every molecule in him still seemed to be quivering away from contact with every other one, he did, more or less. "Don't I look it?"

"Sure, sure," said Freckles soothingly. "You look fine!"

"And what was that with the drives again? Oh— I remember!"

They'd caught on, of course, just as he'd known they would! That the all-important thing was to keep the Dominator from getting the information it had gained back to CG.

"How bad a mess is it?"

"Vernet said it might take a month to patch up. It wouldn't have been so bad if somebody hadn't started the fuel cooking for a moment."

He swore in horror. "Are you lame-brains trying to blow a hole through the planet?"

"Now, that's more like it!" Freckles said, satisfied. "They've got it all under control, anyhow. But I'll

go down and give them a hand. You'd better take it easy for an hour or so!"

"Hold on, Freck!" he said, as she started for the door.

"Yes?"

"I'd just like to find out how big a liar you are. How many members are there to this Group?"

Freckles looked at him for a moment and then came back and sat down on the couch beside him. She pushed the white hat to the back of her head, indicating completely frank talk.

"Now as to that," she said frowning, "nobody really ever lied to you about it. You just never asked. Anyway, there've been ten ever since we left Rhysgaat."

Grevan swore again, softly this time. "How did you get her past the CG observers at the spaceport?"

"We detailed Klim and Eliol to distract the observers, and Priderell came in tucked away in a load of supplies. Nothing much to that part of it. The hard part was to make sure first we were right about her. That's why we had to keep on sabotaging the ship so long."

"So *that's* what— And there I was," said Grevan grimly, "working and worrying myself to death to get the ship ready to start again. A fine, underhanded lot you turned out to be!"

"We all said it was a shame!" Freckles agreed. "And you almost caught up with us a couple of times, at that. We all felt it was simply superb, the way you went snorting and climbing around everywhere, figuring out all the trouble-spots and what to do about them. But what else could we do? *You'd* have let the poor girl wait there till you had the Group safely settled somewhere, and then we wouldn't have let you go back alone anyway. So when Klim finally told us Priderell was just what we'd been looking for all along—well, you know how sensitive Klim is. She couldn't be mistaken about anything like that!"

"Klim's usually very discerning," Grevan admitted carefully. "Just how did you persuade Priderell to come along with us?"

Freckles pulled the hat back down on her forehead, indicating an inner uncertainty.

"We didn't do it that way exactly; so that's a point I ought to discuss with you now. As a matter of fact, Priderell was sound asleep when we picked her up at that farm of hers—Weyer had gassed her a little first. And we've kept her asleep since—it's Room Twenty-three, back of my quarters—and took turns taking care of her."

There was a brief silence while Grevan absorbed the information.

"And now I suppose I'm to wake her up and inform her she's been kidnaped by a bunch of outlaws and doomed to a life of exile?" he demanded.

"Priderell won't mind," Freckles told him encouragingly. "You'll see! Klim says she's crazy about you— That's a very becoming blush you've got, Grevan," she added interestedly. "First time I've noticed it, I think."

"You're too imaginative, Freck," Grevan remarked. "As you may have noticed, I heated our Dominator's little top up almost to the melting point, and it's still glowing. As a natural result, the temperature of this room has gone up by approximately fifteen degrees. I might, of course, be showing some effects of that . . ."

"You might," Freckles admitted. "On the other hand, you're the most heat-adaptive member of the Group, and I haven't even begun to feel warm. That's a genuine blush, Grevan. So Klim was exactly right about you, too!"

"I feel," Grevan remarked, "that the subject has been sufficiently discussed."

"Just as you say, Commander," Freckles agreed soothingly.

"And whether or not she objects to having been kidnaped, we're going to have a little biochemical adaptation problem on our hands for a while—"

"Now there's an interesting point!" Freckles interrupted. "We'd planned on giving her the full standard CG treatment for colonists, ordinary-human, before she ever woke up. But her reaction check

showed she's had the full equivalent of that, or more! She must have been planning to change over to one of the more extreme colonial-type planets. But, of course, we'll have to look out for surprises—"

"There're likely to be a few of those!" Grevan nodded. "Room Twenty-three, did you say?"

"Right through my study and up those little stairs!" She stood up. "I suppose I'd better go help the others with the fuel now."

"Perhaps you'd better. I'll just watch the Dominator until it's cooled off safely, and then I'll go wake up our guest."

But he knew he wouldn't have to wake up Priderell. . . .

* * *

He sat listening to faint crackling sounds from within CG's machine, while Freckles ran off to the ramp and went out on it. There was a distant, soft thud, indicating she had taken the quick way down, and a sudden, brief mingling of laughing voices. And then stillness again.

As she had been doing for the past five minutes, Priderell remained sitting on the right-hand section of the slowly cooking Dominator, without showing any particular interest in Grevan's presence. It was a rather good trick, even for a Wild Variant whom CG undoubtedly would have classified as a neuronc monster.

"Thanks for blanking out that compulsion pattern or whatever it was!" he remarked at last, experimentally. "It's not at all surprising that CG is a little scared of you people."

Priderell gazed out into the passageway beyond the door with a bored expression.

"You're not fooling me much," he informed her. "If you weren't just an illusion, you'd get yourself singed good sitting up there."

The green eyes switched haughtily about the room and continued to ignore him.

"It wasn't even hard to figure out," Grevan went on doggedly, "as soon as I remembered your dance with those beasts. The fact is, there weren't any beasts there at all—you just made everybody think there were!"

The eyes turned towards him then, but they only studied him thoughtfully.

He began to feel baffled.

Then the right words came up! Like an inspiration—

"It would be just wild, wishful thinking, of course," he admitted gloomily, "to imagine that Klim could have been anywhere near as right about you as she was about me! But I can't help wondering whether possibly—"

He paused hopefully.

The coral-red lips smiled and moved for a few seconds. And, somewhere else, a low voice was saying:

"Well, *why* don't you come to Room Twenty-three and find out?"

* * *

The Dominator went on crackling, and hissing, and cooling off, unguarded. . . .

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