

WHOEVER YOU ARE

THIS IS A love story. That is to say, it is a story of the greatest need and greatest fear men know. It is also a story of conquest and defeat, of courage and cowardice, and the heroism that is a product of both of them. It begins in security and isolation; it ends in victory and desecration. Whoever you are, this story has happened to you already, and will again. Whoever you are, however you live, you are writing the ending to the story with every breath you take, with every move you make.

In the cabin of the Service rocket, Scanliter Six, Sergeant Bolster and his new crewman, Pfc. Joe Fromm, were playing checkers. It was the bored third day of a routine one-week tour of duty on the Web, checking the activities of the scanner-satellites that held the tight-woven mesh of e-m-g in a hollow sphere of protective power cast around the System.

Fromm studied the board soberly, sighed, and moved a man into unavoidable trouble. Bolster smiled, and both of them looked up momentarily as they heard the click of the keys cutting tape on the receiver.

The sergeant returned his attention to the checker board, and jumped two men before he bothered to look up at the viewer. He saw a streak of light move upward and across the screen in a wide expected curve, from right to left; reached over to inspect the fresh-cut tape, and grunted approval.

"BB-3, coming in at 26°, 13', 37", all correct," he said. "Check 'em off, Joe. "That's nine, thirty-eight, and oneoh-seven at the point of entry. All in correlation. Transmission clear. It's your move."

Fromm picked up the clipboard with the scanlite-station checkoff chart, and marked three tiny squares with his initials, almost without looking. He was still staring at the view-screen, empty now of everything but the distant specks of light that were the stars.

"Hey," Bolster said again. "It's your move."

Joe Fromm didn't even hear him. The scanner outside completed its revolution around the small ship, and .. there it was again! The flaring trail of rockets traveled across the screen, independent of the up-and-down motion of the revolving scanner.

The sergeant grunted again. "What's the matter? Didn't you ever see one home before?"

"That's the first," Fromm said without turning. "Shouldn't we be recording the tape?"

"Not yet." Bolster surveyed the checker board sadly; he'd have a king on the next move . . . if Fromm ever made another move. "All we got now is radar-recog. Then . . . there you are . . ." He nodded at the renewed clacking of the keys. "That'll be the code-dope coming in. Then we wait till after it hits detection, and we get the last OK, before we send the tape to the Post."

He explained it all dutifully just the same. It used to be when they sent a new man out, they at least took him on a practice tour first. "Look, make a move will you? You got a whole year here to sit and look at 'em come in."

With difficulty, the Pfc. took his eyes off the viewer, touch a piece on the board at random, and pushed it forward, leaving Bolster with the choice of a three-man jump to nowhere, or the one-man jump that would net him his king. The private leaned forward to finger the tape as it emerged from the receiver, reading off the replies to code-dope demands, and signal responses, with a certain reverent intensity. "Did you ever see an illegal entry?" he asked. "I mean an attempt? Somebody told me there was one on this sect . . ."

At that instant the BB-3 hit the detector field awaiting it at the point of entry on the Web, and generated mechanical panic in an entire sequence of scanlite instruments. Synchronized pulses from the three scanlite stations circling the point of entry transmitted their frustration in the face of the unprecedented and unpredicted; and the tape in the cabin of Scanliter Six vibrated out of the recorder under the furious impact of the chattering keys.

Alarm bells began to shrill: first in the small cabin, directly over the sergeant's head; then in similar cabins on four other Scanliter rockets within range; finally, about two minutes later, in the Exec Office at Phobos Post, which was the nearest Solar Defense base to the point of entry at the time.

Pfc. Joe Fromm stopped his hesitant query in mid-word, feeling vaguely guilty for having brought the subject up. Sergeant Bolster knocked over the checker board reaching for the tape. He read it, paled visibly, passed it across to the private, and started transmitting to the Post almost at the same instant.

On Phobos, a Signal Tech. depressed three levers on his switchboard before he stopped to wonder what was wrong. Green alarm meant emergency calls to the O.D., Psychofficer, and P.R. Chief. The Tech. sent out the summons, then stopped to read the tape.

DYTEKTR FYLD RYPORT: BB-3 EM RADASHNZ INDKAT ALYN LIF—RYPYT ALYN LIF UBORD. RYPT: DYTEKTR FYLD RYPORT VIA SKANLITS 9-38-107 TU SKANLITR 6 SHOZ NO UMN LIF UBORD BB-3.

BOLSTER, SGT/SKNR 6

By the time the Phobos Post Commander got up from his dinner table, the Psychofficer put down the kitten he was playing with, and the Public Relations Deputy pushed back the stool at her dressing table, the crews of all five

Scanliters within range of the point of entry, as well as the Signals Tech. on Phobos, knew all the pertinent details of what had occurred.

The Baby Byrd III, a five-man starscout, under command of Captain James Malcolm, due back after almost a full year out of System, had approached a point of entry just outside the orbit of Saturn on the electromagneto-gravitic Web of force that surrounded the Solar System. It had signalled the correct radar recognition pattern, and replied to the challenge of the scanlite stations circling the point of entry with the anticipated code responses. Accordingly, the point had been softened to permit entry of the ship, and a standard detector set up around the soft spot.

Thus far, it was routine homecoming for a starscout. It was only when the BB-3 entered the detector field that the automatics on the scanner-satellite stations began to shrill the alarms for human help. The field registered no human electro-magnetic emanations on board the BB-3. The e-m pattern it got was undoubtedly alive ... and just as undeniably alien.

For the third time in the history of the Web, an attempt at entry had been made by unauthorized aliens; and those aliens were apparently in sole possession of a Solar starscout. The third attempt . . . and the third failure: the BB-3 was already secured in a slightly intensified smaller sphere of the same e-m-g mesh that made up the Web, suspended at midpoint between the three circling scanlite stations.

Eternal vigilance is most assuredly the price of the peace of the womb. The membrane of force that guarded the System from intrusion had, in turn, to be guarded and maintained by the men who lived within it. The scanner-satellites were as nearly infallible as a machine can be; they might have run effectively for centuries on their own very slowly diminishing feedback-power systems. But man's security was too precious a thing to trust entirely to the products of man's ingenuity. Each year a new group of the System's youth was called to Service, and at the end of the year, a few were chosen from among the volunteers to man the Scanliters that serviced the satellite stations which comprised the Web.

For even the most adventurous of youths, one further year of Scanliting was usually enough; they came back from their fifty tours Outside prepared to keep their feet on solid ground, and to forget the brief experience of facing the unknown. But each year, too, there were a few of them who learned to crave the intoxication of danger, who could no longer be content to settle back into the warm security of the System. It was these warped veterans of the Web who became Byrdmen.

Secure within the womb-enclosure of the Web, five billion Solar citizens could wreak their wills upon their little worlds, and carry on the ever more complex design for nourishment of all the intra-System castes and categories.

Outside, the emissaries of mankind streaked through the heavens on their chariots of fire, spreading the Solar culture through galactic space, spawning the seeds of men between the stars. First went the Baby Byrds, to scout new lands beyond the farthest outposts; then the Byrds, with their full complements of scientists, and giant laboratories, to test the promise of the newly-charted planets; and after them, the

giant one-way starships went.

Somehow there were always just enough bold desperate souls, yearning for danger and ready to die for a dream, to fill the human cargo-couches of the colony ships: the Mayflowers and Livingstons and Columbos that left the safety of the Web forever to fix new germ-cells of humanity on far-flung planets in the speckled skies.

Inside the Web, on four inhabited planets and half a thousand habitable asteroids, men lived in the light of the sun by day, and drew their warmth and power from it. By night, they turned to rest at peace; each one under his own sector of the high-domed sky, the hollow sphere of force through which no alien source of light could penetrate and still retain identity.

The Web glowed always with the mingled and diffracted energy of all the universe Outside; no photon passed its portals, no smallest particle of energy came through without the necessary pause for hail-and-password that maintained the calm security of the Web's inner light.

Scanliter Six was already proceeding at full speed toward the trapped BB, acting on normal emergency procedures, when the keys taped out the order from Commander Harston on Phobos post to do just that. No stars showed on the viewer; they had stopped the rotation of the scanner and the screen held a steady picture of the three Scanlite stations with a fuzzy hump in the center that was too bright to look at comfortably. Scanner rays could not possibly penetrate the thick field that held the BB-3 suspended in the Web.

"Well," Bolster said sourly. "Here's your chance to be a hero, kid."

Joe Fromm knew it was childish of him to be excited. He tried not to look interested. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yeah. What happens now is, we get there and code in that the situation is as reported. Then the brass has a conference and they decide somebody has got to investigate, so they ask for volunteers. We're the laddies on the spot. The other boys are all on Stand-by according to this. . . ."

He waved the orders tape at Fromm, who caught it and read it through carefully.

"And if we were on Stand-by instead of Proceed, you know what we'd be doing right now?" the sergeant went on, enjoying his own discomfort as loudly as possible. "I'll tell you what. We'd be standing all right, right smack where we were when the tape came in. Not one second closer."

"Stand-by is supposed to mean that you get into the best position for observation," the Pfc. recited.

"Sure. The best position for observation, kid, is in-scan and out of blowup range. So you take your choice: you stay where you are when the tape comes in, or you back out as far as you can and stay in-scan. Anyhow, we're the boys on the spot, see? They're going to want a volunteer to board the Beebee, and I got a hunch," he finished with a faint note of hope, "that I might come out of this in one piece just on account of you are probably going to want to be a hero."

"Could be," Fromm said nonchalantly. "You're senior; after all, it's your privilege."

He was delighted that he managed to keep a poker face throughout the statement

Joe Fromm stepped out of the airlock into space, and let himself float free, orienting, for a slow count of five. He had done it a hundred times and more in drill, but it felt different now. As in the drill, he made a routine extra check of his equipment: tank, jetter, axe, welder, magnograpple mechtape recorder, (no radio in an insul-suit), knife, gun, signal mirror, medikit. All OK.

He set the jet at gentle and squirted off toward the glowing ball of force that held the starscout. Two more squirts, and he was as close as he could get. He flashed the mirror twice at Bolster in the Scanliter, to start the passageway in the sphere opening. This was the last contact till he came out again. If he ...

If I come out again . . . he thought the whole phrase through deliberately, and was surprised at the way his mind accepted the possibility, and dismissed it. He felt tremendously alive, almost as if each separate cell was tingling with some special vigor and awareness. And in the center of it all, in some hidden part of himself, he was dead calm, almost amused. Was this what they called courage?

He flashed the mirror again. Bolster was certainly taking his time. All he had to do was throw a switch. Fromm began flashing angry code with the mirror and kept it up, knowing Bolster couldn't answer and rejoicing in the knowledge, until he saw the opening appear in the ball of force, and begin to expand.

Then he realized it wasn't simply throwing a switch. Once the passageway-mechanism was put into operation, it had to keep going on its own, opening and closing at intervals so as to permit him egress, and still not let enough e-m-g through in either direction to disturb the power-stasis inside. It took only a little bit of computer work . . . but quite a bit more intricate checking of the relays, to make certain the automatics would not fail.

He had to hold himself back to keep from diving through as soon as the hole was as big as his suit . . . but he waited, as he had been trained to do, until it stopped enlarging. The computer knew better than he did how much space he needed.

Then he squirted forward and through. The BB looked strange, hanging there in the middle of nothing, with an air of polite impatience, waiting to finish its passage into the System.

Joe grinned, and duly spoke his thought out loud for the record. "Every single thing that passes through your head," they'd said over and over again in school. "When you're on any kind of solo operation, you want to be sure the guy who takes over knows everything you did, no matter how crazy it seems. An idea that doesn't connect for you could make sense to him."

So Joe Fromm told the mechtape attachment on' his suit that the starscout looked impatient. He kept talking, describing his actions and thoughts and emotions, as he approached the ship cautiously, and opened the outer lock door. More waiting, and he informed the tape that the air lock was in operating condition.

Then he was in the ship, and omitted to mention in his running commentary that he was scared silly. Down the corridor ... open the cabin doors one at a time ... empty, empty . . . not empty. Go on in, Joe; he's out cold; couldn't hurt a fly.

"One of the aliens is in this cabin. This is the third door I have opened, second cabin to the right going down the corridor from the lock to Control . . . he's either dead or unconscious . . . hope they're all like that . he's big . . . hope they're not all like that. Maybe ten feet tall, sort of curled up on the bunk, might have been asleep." Might still be, might wake up.

He gulped and decided he'd better put it on record. "Might still . . ." No, that was foolish. These characters had registered e.m. radiations on the instruments in the stations. They couldn't stay conscious inside the e.m.g. field without insul-suits. Anything strong enough to stop a BB in its tracks would stop a man too.

But it's not a man; it's . . . "It's definitely humanoid . . . hard to believe any alien creatures could evolve so much like humans. No tenacles, nothing like that. Arms and hands look like ours . . . fingers too. He's wearing some kind of robe . . . hard to get it loose with these gloves on, can't see the legs for sure, but the arms are human all right. Face is different, something funny about the mouth, sort of pursed-up-looking. Closed, can't see the inside ... guess I can try and open it ... no, later, maybe. I better take a look around. Anyhow, this guy is a lot like you and me only almost twice as big. Not very hairy, dark skin, big black eyes . . . how can anything that's not human have eyes that look at you like that, even when he's out cold? I don't know ... going out now, next cabin, second door on the left . . .

"Here's another one . . . on the floor this time, kind of crumpled up . . . must have been standing when the field hit, and fell down. Nothing new here . . . wait a minute, this fella must have cut his hand on something when he fell . . . yeah, there's an open locker door, with an edge. Blood is dried, looks like it's a lot darker than ours, but it's crazy how human it looks anyhow . . . Going out again now ... in the corridor, no more doors here . . ."

There were two more of them in the control room: one strapped in the pilot's seat, squeezed in really; he just about could make it. The other was slumped over the solar analog computer.

"Looks like he was checking the landing data," Fromm reported. "These guys sure were confident. Two of 'em off shift when they were coming in, and everything set for a normal landing. Didn't they figure on any trouble at all? They should have realized they couldn't just sit down on one of our planets. Hell, they knew about the Web; they gave the code-dope straight, and they decelerated to approach, and had the correct angle . . . I don't get it ... Here goes once around the room now. I will check all instruments.

"Starting from the door, and turning right: Star-chart microviewer intact and operating, films filed properly, I think. Won't take time to check them all now, but they look right. . . . Radio desk appears in

normal condition for use, can't test. . . . Space suit locker is full of strange stuff, will come back to examine. . . . analog comps come next; this guy is sprawled all over them. . . ."

He followed his nose around the cylindrical room, till he came back to the door again. Everything was, or seemed to be, in good working order. A few adjustments had been made in levers and handholds, to fit the aliens' larger hands; otherwise, virtually nothing had been touched except for normal use.

"Okay, I guess I better start on the locker now. . . ." But he didn't want to; he felt suddenly tired. Not scared any more . . . maybe that was it. Now he knew he was safe, and there weren't any booby traps or anything seriously wrong, he was feeling the strain. Let Bolster do some work too, he thought angrily, and almost said it out loud for the tape. Then he realized that his sudden pique was really just weariness, and at the same time he became acutely aware of hunger and an even more pressing biological urge. Time to go home, Joe. Always leave the party early, that's how to stay popular.

He ought at least to get the robe off one of the creatures first, and make sure about their anatomy, but he had an odd reluctance to do it. They were too human . . . it seemed as if it wasn't fair somehow to go poking around under their clothes.

Hell! Let Bolster do it! He left the ship.

Alone in the Scanlitter, Joe Fromm played his mechtape into the permanent recorder, and turned up the volume so he could hear it himself, and get everything clear for his report to Phobos. Some of the stuff sounded crazy, but he could tell what part was fact and what was just his own imagination. He chewed on a pencil end, and occasionally noted down something he should be sure to remember.

Altogether, composing the report was more painful than visiting the ship had been. He had just started putting it onto the transmitter when he saw the indicator for the outer lock light up. Bolster sure hadn't stayed on that ship long! He felt better now about coming back himself.

The sergeant came inside shedding his insul-suit, and bursting with excitement.

"You should of looked in that locker, kid!" He was triumphant. "Anyway, it's a good thing for me you didn't. This is the kind of good luck bonuses are made of." He removed an envelope carefully from the storage pocket on the outside of the suit. "Got your stuff in yet? I want to shoot this to them fast!"

"I just started . . ." Fromm said.

"Well, we'll flash this, and you can finish up afterwards."

He handed the envelope to the younger man, and started climbing out of the leg pieces of the suit. "Go on! Read it, man!"

Fromm opened the flap and unfolded a piece of official Service stationary. To whom it may concern; it said on top, and then right underneath: To the Staff Officers of Solar Defense:

"The other men have asked me to write this message, and I guess I can do it all right, but I'm afraid I'll have to be pretty informal. I've tried to write it up in military report style, only it's just not the kind of thing that Service language fits.

"For one thing, the very first line of the report form stopped me, because we don't know where we are. Only the Captain knew our orders and he's dead now, and we couldn't find his log, or any of his papers, anywhere in the ship.

"We've set a course for the big fellas by backtracking on the analog comps. That means it will take them almost as long to get back as it took us to get there, but that's just as well, because it will bring them in about the time our tour is due up, and maybe that'll make it easier for them to get in.

"We've done our best to explain to them all the dangers involved—not being sure of the course, even, and being pretty sure you folks won't let them through. But we can't talk to them as easy as they talk to us. We can get over general ideas all right, and any kind of thought that has a solid object nearby to attach to, but the idea of people, of humans that is, not wanting to let them into the System—well, even if we talked the same language . . . that is, if they talked a language at all that we could learn . . . I don't think they could understand that idea.

"I'm not going to try to tell you anything about them because if they get far enough to show you this, they can explain everything themselves. This message is just to let you know that the four of us are here, safe and sound, and staying behind of our own free will. Since Captain Malcolm's suicide, there's nobody

to order us home, and we like it here. Besides, there isn't room enough in the BB for more than five people—humans, I mean—or four of them (they need more food). And they want to send four along on the trip; I think they picked out their leading scientists in different fields, so they can get as much information as possible, and be able to answer your questions.

"I don't know. Probably a Psychofficer or some of our scientists will be able to communicate better with them on this kind of thing. We get along fine for everyday purposes, but you see, I'm not even sure what kind of scientists they're sending.

"The only thing the others and I are sure of, and that's what this message is for, is that you can trust these big fellas up to the limit. They've treated us fine, and they ... well, it's a funny way to put it, but "like" isn't strong enough . . . they just seem to love everybody, humans as well as their own kind.

"We will wait here for further orders. You can probably figure out where we are from the analog comp records.

"Respectfully yours,
"George Gentile, Byrdman 1st Class,

and on behalf of
"Johann Grauber By/2
Tsin Lao-Li, By/2
Arne Carlsen, By/ 3."

"I did a tour of duty with Jim Malcolm once," the Commander said slowly. "He was a pretty good guy. I ... liked him. It's hard to think of him committing suicide. I wish this Gentile had been a little more specific."

Lucille Ardin, Public Relations Deputy at Phobos Post, skimmed the message tape rapidly, and passed it along to the Psychofficer. She cocked one feathery eyebrow cynically. "These boys just don't make sense," she said. "They've been sold something all right . . . but what?"

The Commander shook his head, waiting for Dr. Schwartz to finish reading. "Well, Bob?" he said, as soon as the Psychofficer looked up. "What do you think?"

"I'd like to see that log," Schwartz said thoughtfully. "So would I!" Commander William Hartson had earned his position as Assistant Chief of Staff for Solar Defense. He was that rare thing: an officer admired equally by the general public and by the men who worked under him. At sixty-eight years of age, he was still in the prime of health and vitality—but old enough to have seen his fill of violence, danger, and death. He was decisive in action; but a decision involving the lives of others would be made with care.

Bob Schwartz had worked with Hartson long enough to understand these things. "This Captain . . . ?" he asked, "Malcolm? Would you say he was ... well, a fairly typical line officer?"

The Commander permitted himself a faint smile. "Trying to figure the 'military mind' again, Bob? As a matter of fact, I think Jim Malcolm is—was one of the few officers who'd fit your picture pretty well. Courage, devotion, precision—a stubborn s.o.b., who went by the rule book himself and figured everybody else could do at least as much . . . but the kind who'd lay down his life for his Service without thinking twice. It's just suicide that doesn't make sense...."

Harston's voice broke off, and for a moment the only sound in the room was the shuffling of paper. Schwartz still held the message tape, running it through his fingers as if the feel of it would somehow help him to understand its meaning better. Lucy Ardin pushed away the pad on which she'd been scribbling Hartson's explanation of the forcesphere that was holding the BB-3 captive and its alien crew unconscious.

"God, what a story!" she whispered reverently into the silence. She ground out a half-smoked cigarette in the Commander's big ash-tray, and stood up; the silver-sequined dinner gown in which she'd answered the alarm glittered painfully under the overhead light. It was entirely typical of Lucy that when the call-bell rang in her bedroom, she had pushed back the stool from her dressing table without taking

even the extra instant's time to complete the slash of crimson on her lips. Then picking up the portfolio that was always ready for use, she had arrived at the Exec Office, with the lipsticking finished en route, within seconds after the two men who lived on the Post.

"All right," she said briskly. "What happens now? We stitch up some six-tentacled strait-jackets and make our visitors nice and safe, then we take the field off and haul 'em down? Where to? What do we do with them afterwards? Who gets to interview them?"

The Psychofficer looked up sharply, and Hartson chuckled. "Relax, Bob. I'm afraid it's our baby all the way down the line. I wish I was looking forward to it like you two are. I have a hunch it may turn out to be something of a mess. . . . The aliens, by the way, are humanoid, Miss Ardin. Perhaps you'd like to see the tape again? I believe there's a detailed description . . . hey Bob? You're done with it, aren't you?"

"Sorry." Schwartz handed it to the girl, and snapped out of his abstracted mood. "Is it safe to leave them in the stasis a little longer, Bill?" he asked.

"Can't say for sure. With humans, twelve hours doesn't do any harm. These fellas may be dead already for all we know. Best we can do is assume they react like us."

"It seems to me that log must be somewhere on the ship," the Psychofficer said. "If there's time, I think it might be a good idea to try and find it—before we decide anything. A man like Malcolm would have made sure the papers were safe, if he had any way to do it at all."

"You're right." Hartson, too, came up from his reflections and sprang into action. "You're damned right! If it's there we can find it. And if we can't—well, that's an answer too!"

Joe Fromm went back to the BB-3 with two other men from the stand-in Scanliters that had now been ordered up to assist. Between them, they searched the Byrd from nose to nozzles, and behind a panel in the electrical repair cabinet, they found the ship's papers: charts, orders, and the missing log.

Fromm took time to open the log and look at the last page: he hardly had to struggle with his conscience at all over it. Under the dateline, in neat typing, it said:

"Carlsen should have been back an hour ago. Under the circumstances, that means they've got him too. My error was in not leaving after I talked to Tsin last week. Three of us could have brought the ship back. Alone, I don't believe I can do it.

"I have considered taking off anyhow, simply in order to make certain the natives do not gain any further knowledge of the ship. My only choices now are betrayal or self-destruction, and between these two, I am afraid I have no real choice. I must therefore pick the most effective means of suicide, and after giving the matter careful thought, have determined that a systematic destruction of the control room is a wiser procedure than the complete removal of the ship from the planet.

"By following this course of action, I can at least hope that a future expedition, or perhaps even a rescue-ship, will find this log and understand the danger here.

"This evening, I shall have my last supper in style. Tomorrow, I shall finish the dismantling of the controls, and hide this book, together with the more important of the ship's papers . . . and may God have mercy on my soul!"

Below that, in almost equally neat and legible a script, were two paragraphs.

"Once more I have delayed too long. Gentile, my firstclassman, is at the outer lock now, and he has three of the natives with him. Apparently they now have him sufficiently under control so that he will do for them what they have not dared to do for themselves. They are coming into the ship.

"I expect they are coming for me, and I cannot risk exposing myself to their control. I know too much that they can use. The work of dismantling the controls is barely started; I'm afraid the enlisted men can still repair it readily, but none of them, after all, even know where we are; the star-charts and orders will be hidden with this log. I can only hope the papers remain hidden until the right people come to find them."

Underneath, there was a careful signature: "James Malcolm, Captain, Solar Byrd Service, in command Baby Byrd III," and in parenthesis below that, one word of macabre humor, "(deceased)."

They ordered Scanliter Six down to Phobos Post, to bring in the papers of the BB-3. There was too much material to transmit by radio.

Bolster grinned and slapped his Pfc. on the back. "We're both a couple of bloomin' heroes," he said. "Just the kind of a hero I like to be. Some other guys'll be around when they decide to blast that Baby, and you and me can watch it all from the Post."

"Blast it?" Joe looked up from the log, holding his finger in the page. "You're kidding. Why would they ..."

"Brother, you got the reason wrapped around your finger. One look at that, and they'll blow those babies clear back to where they come from! You can take a chance on a guy who fights fair, but these fellas—"

"How do you know they're fighting us?" Fromm demanded. "You saw the Byrdman's note, the one you brought in . . . This guy Malcolm was off his rocker!"

"Well, I'll buy that one, too. You can't tell with the brass when they get an idea in their heads. But look, kid, you gotta grow up some. That note I brought in—it's pretty easy to get a guy to write something like that if you got him hypnotized to start with, and you're twice his size anyhow—not to mention there being a whole planetful of your kind and only four of his. I can tell you any how, that's how the brass'll see it. Solar Defense doesn't take chances."

"Did you read what it says here?" Fromm insisted. "The part where Malcolm tells us about talking to Tsin? It just doesn't make sense to take it the way he did. He was space-happy, that's all. The Commander isn't going to swallow this stuff."

"You wait and see," the sergeant said again. "And when you do, you're gonna be awful glad you're down there instead of here."

"I . . . look, I know this sounds crazy . . ." Fromm put the log down finally, and blurted out the rest of it. "I'd like to stick around. If anybody goes back out there, I want a chance to take another look at those guys. You think you could take somebody from one of the other ships down with you, and leave me here?"

"It not only sounds crazy," Bolster said. "It is crazy. But it's your body, son. You want to stick around, you can bet nobody else does." He shook his head uncomprehendingly, and began punching out a message to Scanliter Twelve, where Chan Lal would jump at the chance to change spots with his weakwitted Pfc.

"I ordered him to return to ship immediately. He refused. His exact words, insofar as I recall them, were, 'Captain, I wish I could do as you desire me to—or even better that I could convince you to come with me and visit our friends. They are our friends. If you would give them a chance to talk with you, I think you might understand better. It is hard to explain with just words. But I simply cannot go back now. (Emphasis is mine . . . JM) You are a married man, sir. Perhaps I might feel differently if there were some love waiting for me at home too. But I am young and not yet married, and . . .'"

"I broke in here, thinking that I might be able to use persuasion, where authority had failed. I pointed out that there was very little likelihood he would ever be married, if I decided to take up the ship, abandoning him and Gentile on the planet—as of course, I have every right to do in view of their outright insubordination. The natives here, for all their startlingly humanoid appearance, are twice our size, and are almost certainly not suitable for breeding, from a purely biologic viewpoint.

"He replied quite earnestly that he hoped I would not take that drastic step . . . that he did not wish to remain permanently among the natives, but that he felt he 'had to' stay long enough to become fully acquainted with them and with their way of life, and to 'be healed of all the hurts and scars of a lifetime in the System.'

"The conversation went on for some time, but the parts I have already recorded contain the gist of it. There was one thing Tsin said, however, that I feel should be included here, along with the train of thought that followed it. If anything should happen to me or to my ship, I suspect it will in some way be connected with my low susceptibility to the emotional point he seemed to be trying to make.

"Tsin reminded me, during the conversation, of a story I have always considered rather bathetic: that of the little orphan girl, in the days before the creches, who threw a note over the high wall of the 'orphanage' saying: 'Whoever you are, I love you.'

"This anecdote, I gathered, was supposed to define for me the nature of the emotional 'healing' he

was receiving at the hands—or I suppose I should say the minds—of the natives.

"This particular bit of bathos has been annoying me for years. I have had the story related to me at least three times previously, always to illustrate some similarly obscure emotional point. And I have always wondered afterwards what the end of the story might have been.

"Now it seems very important to be able to foresee the results of the child's action. What happened when the note was picked up and read? And why did the child write it?

"It is this last question, I think, that bothers me the most. A sentimentalist might answer that she meant it, but I find this unlikely. At best, I believe, she meant that she hoped whoever found it would love her; and that is the very best interpretation I can put on it. It seems even more likely that her motive was even more specific: if she threw such billet doux over the wall regularly, I should think eventually one of the sentimentalists would have found it, made some response, and provided the means for her to get over the orphanage wall into the world outside.

"The natives here have a fairly highly-developed technology, and quite obviously a very highly-developed psychology or mental science of some sort. They are telepaths, after all. And they have taken no pains to conceal from us their interest in acquiring a means of space travel.

"There is nothing to pin down, no way to make certain of their real attitudes towards us. They have greeted us warmly, and have done nothing to indicate any hostility or to harm us in any way—nothing but walk off with two of my crew in an apparently friendly fashion.

"Perhaps the wisest course of action would be to leave now, while I still have two men on board. But it is a hard decision to make—to maroon two of my men on an alien planet.

"If I believed for a moment that Gentile and Tsin are responsible for their own actions, I should not hesitate to make that decision. But their behavior is so entirely 'out of character' that I can see no explanation except that they are acting under some form of hypnotic control. As I see it, my duty is to make every effort, including main force, to return them to the ship before I leave."

Hartson read it for the fourth time, and slapped the typescript down on the desk. "I . . . hell, Jim Malcolm was a friend of mine! How can I tell? It sounds like him . . . sure! It sounds like every report he ever wrote, except where it sounds like him being pie-eyed in a bull-session."

He sat down, and let the blank bewilderment he felt show in his eyes as he faced the Psychofficer. "Well, what do you say? I can't decide this one by myself."

Courtesy turned him, halfway through the question to face the PR Chief on the other side of the desk. Courtesy, and common sense, both. Officially, Lucy's job was just to get out the news—or to keep it in, as seemed wisest. The catch was in that last phrase. In practice, she was both public censor and interpreter-at-large for the Post; and her Civil Service appointment made her the only authority on Phobos who was independent of the Service.

The Commander had been dealing with the P.R. Bureau long enough so that in six months at the Post, Lucy had never yet had any cause to remove her velvet glove. It was easy to forget sometimes about the iron beneath it; one might almost think that she forgot herself.

"I'll check to Doctor Schwartz," she demurred now.

Schwartz managed a smile. "Will you please stop being polite?" he asked. "You've got an opinion. Let's hear it." She hesitated, and he added: "I don't even like what I'm thinking. I better think it a little more before I say it."

"All right." Her voice was controlled, but her eyes gleamed with excitement. She was talking at Schwartz, almost ignoring the Commander. "I think these fellas have the biggest thing since e-m-g. It's the one thing we haven't been able to crack at all; you know it as well as I do. They've got the unbeatable weapon—the psychological weapon. You can't fight 'em, because you don't want to. People call modern P.R. mass hypnotism, but the techniques we've got are child's play compared to what these guys can do. They've got the real thing. The question is, can we get it away from them? Has Psych Section got any way of handling something this hot?"

"I take it," Hartson put in drily, "that you are convinced of the accuracy of Captain Malcolm's interpretation of the events?"

She looked puzzled. "Why . . . yes. How else can you explain it? Has there ever been a case of

desertion like that before?"

"Never," he said crisply, and turned to the Psychofficer again. "All right, Bob. You've had some time now. Say your piece."

"Let me start this way" Schwartz said hesitantly. "I think Lucy is right on one respect anyway ... what they've got is an irresistible weapon. If it is a weapon. But to accept that idea, we'd have to presuppose the existence of a war, or at least hostility between them and us. There's a verse that's been running through my head for the last hour. I'm sorry, Bill, to be so roundabout. Just try to put up with me a few minutes, will you? I can't quite remember the whole thing, but it's about an 'enemy' who 'drew a circle to keep me out.' Then there's a line I remember clearly: 'But love and I knew better. We drew a circle to bring him in.' You see what I'm driving at? Certainly our basic attitude toward any alien is potentially hostile. They are guilty until proven innocent."

"We've been all over that ground, Bob," Hartson broke in. "I know your opinion, and you ought to know mine by now. I don't like it either, but it's the reason why we have been consistently successful in such contacts."

"Consistently victorious, I'd say. All right, let's just put it that I am emotionally more inclined to accept Gentile's attitude than Malcolm's. I see no evidence to support the view that these people are using a hypnotic weapon; it is at least as likely that the feeling they projected at our men was honest and uncalculated. Why not assume for a moment that the occupants of that ship really are four of their leading scientists, sent here to exchange knowledge with us?"

"You've got a point there," Lucy Ardin said unexpectedly. "An act of aggression against these four could make trouble if they were on the level to start with. I think it gets down to a good old-fashioned problem in shielding. Has Psych Section got any way of handling these boys if we bring them in, Doc?"

He considered for a moment.

"That depends. We've got anti-hypnotics, and we've got personnel specially trained against susceptibility to hypnosis. But the Beebe had the same drugs, and should have had some trained personnel too. There's a point, Bill. I'd like to see the basic psych ratings on all five of those men, if you can get 'em. Especially Malcolm's. I could get the papers myself," he added, smiling weakly, "Through channels, it wouldn't take more than three or four weeks. Can you get 'em fast?"

"I can try." Hartson jumped at the chance for concrete action. He rang for an aide, and scribbled an order to Records in his own handwriting. "Put this on the facscan," he said briskly, "and give it a top-rush priority. I think I see what you're getting at, Bob," he said, as the door closed behind the uniformed girl. "I remember I was kind of surprised myself when I heard Jim had gone into the Byrd Service. Couldn't imagine him going Outside voluntarily. He was an Earthman all the way through. Why he didn't even believe Marsmen were really human. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Part of it. That much was pretty clear in his report. I want to know the comparative resistance of the crew members to hypnosis and what the other men's attitudes were toward alien life—things like that."

"I thought all Byrdmen had to pass standardized tests for that," the PR Chief said, just a little sharply.

"They do. At least, the enlisted men do. But there's still a range of individual variation. And officers . . . well, they have a tough time getting enough men to command the Beebees. I think just about any regular line officer who volunteered would pass the test. . . ."

He looked to Hartson for confirmation, and got a reluctant nod; then he went on. "Even with the men, it depends where they took their tests. That'll show on the papers. Psych Section isn't too—efficient—in some spots."

"I'll bear that in mind," Lucy said tautly. "But I'd still like to know just how much Psych Section right here is equipped to do. You say you've got the drugs and the personnel, Doctor. All right, then, if the Commander brings these fellows in alive, can you handle them? If you can't . . ." She shrugged.

"That depends." The Psychofficer declined the challenge of her tone and went on deliberately: "We can handle it all right ... if it's as simple a thing as hypnosis. It happens that I don't believe Captain Malcolm was right about that. I can tell better after I see his psych ratings. . . ."

"All right! Then I take it we're going to sit around here for the next few hours waiting to see what the tests say? That gives you a little more time to make up your mind. Well, if I'm going to spend the night

here, I'd like to be a little more comfortable. Do you mind if I run home for a change of clothes while we're waiting, Commander?"

Hartson eyed the shimmering stiffness of her dinner gown unhappily. "I'm sorry, Miss Ardin. I hope you'll understand. This qualifies as a Major Policy decision, and I'm afraid I'll have to ask you not to leave until we are finished with whatever we decide."

She shrugged again, and sat down. "Could I have a typer then? I could be getting some of my story into shape."

Schwartz laughed. From the vantage point of the smoking jacket and carpet slippers in which he'd answered the emergency call, he said easily, "Bill, couldn't you order something from Supply for the lady? S.I. coveralls, or something like that? It might make a difference in our decision if she could be more comfortable."

"I can do that," Hartson said shortly. "And of course you may have any equipment you wish, Miss Ardin."

"Thank you, Commander," she said, too sweetly. "I'm sure it will help. I wonder if perhaps we could facilitate matters by sending for the doctor's uniform too? If I'm to be made more flexible, I suspect a change of clothes might make him more decisive."

Hartson grinned. "She's got a point there, Bob," he said mildly.

"All right!" The Psychofficer stood up abruptly, paced the length of the small room, and wheeled to face them. "All right, I'll tell you what I think. I think the human race is too damn scared and too damn hungry to be able to face this thing. Hungry for security, for reassurance, for comfort—for love. And scared! Scared of anything different, anything Outside, anything one degree more intense than the rules allow.

"Also—pardon my bluntness, Bill—I think Captain Malcolm's reaction was typical of all that's sickest in our System. The very fact that we are seriously sitting here considering how much of a menace these four individuals represent—four humanoid beings, who come armed with nothing but a message of love! That very fact—that we sit and stew over it, I mean—makes them dangerous.

"You want to know what I think? I think what they've got—whether it's a weapon or a natural way of life, whether it's hypnotism or open-hearted honesty, or anything else, is—not unbeatable, not ultimate, not any of the other adjectives that've been thrown around here tonight but, specifically, irresistible.

"I think all of us—you, Bill, wanting to do the 'blameless' thing—and you, suffering through hours of torment in those ridiculous clothes because they're supposed to make you 'attractive'—and maybe me most of all, hating to say what I know because it's brutal—all of us and the rest of the System too, have one crying need that the lousy culture we've made for ourselves can't possibly fulfill.

"We want love. We need love. Every poor blessed damned soul among us. And we need it so much, it can be used as a weapon against us!

"Understand, please, just because it's important to me to have it on the record, that I don't for a moment believe it's hypnotism they're using. I think they mean it. But ..."

"Well, at last!" Lucy Ardin sighed and moved a tense finger for the first time since he'd started talking. "Then you think you can handle it?"

Schwartz stared at her in amazement. "Didn't you hear anything I said? No. No, I don't think I can handle it, or that anybody else can. I don't believe it's hypnosis, but I can't see that that matters. Or rather, I might feel more at ease about it if I could believe that.

"Damn it, Bill, I hate this! I want you to understand clearly that the advice I am giving you is against my own inclinations and instincts. Now look: if it is to be regarded as a weapon—and I see no other way we may regard it from the point of view of Solar Defense—then it is irresistible. There is no way to tie or bind the minds of these—people—except by keeping them unconscious, which would automatically defeat any purpose of investigation."

He picked up his copy of the summary and excerpts from the log, riffled through the pages, and threw it down again, sadly. "Bill, I'd give all my ratings, and ten years off my life for the chance to talk to those guys myself, and find out . . . but my advice as an officer of Solar Defense is that we have no choice but to destroy the aliens before they regain consciousness."

Both the others were on their feet as he finished. "God damn it, Bob!" Hartson shouted. "You can't just . . ."

"Don't you see?" Lucy Ardin's crisp voice cut in. "All he's saying is he doesn't know; none of us know, and I want to find out! I'm not scared of it. Maybe you need love that bad, Psychofficer, but I don't!" She sat down again, triumphant and breathless.

The Commander ignored her. "Is that your last word, Bob? Shall I take that as your decision?"

"I'm afraid so, Bill. You heard Lucy just now. Remember what Malcolm was wondering, about the end of the story of the little orphan girl? That's one answer. In terms of the little girl, it would mean that whoever found the note took it back inside and told the authorities that one of their children was writing dirty notes—so the kid could be investigated. That's just one ending. There are lots of others, but don't forget the one he was afraid of. Don't forget all the sentimentalists—like me for instance. If I were to forget my duty as an officer of the Service, I would want nothing more than to get the little girl out of the orphanage, just so she could love them.

"And don't forget, either, that there would be any number of different answers besides. And that everyone would feel strongly about his own solution. You have your choice, Commander. You can destroy them in the name of Security and Safety—or you can risk a System-wide civil war, and total 'conquest' by an alien race. What'll you have?"

Commander Hartson smiled wryly. "I'll take vanilla," he said distinctly, and rang for an aide. The uniformed girl appeared in the doorway. "Jenny," he said, "I want orders typed up for countersigning to arrange all details for the moving of the Baby Byrd III to Deimos Isolation Post immediately. The ship will be piloted by Pfc. Joseph Fromm, now aboard the Scanliter Twelve. We will want a continuous radio report from the pilot starting with his entry into the ship.

"Separate orders are to go to Scanliters Seventeen and Twenty-two, to follow the BB-3 in with all artillery on the ready. They are to maintain radio silence, with vocal reception open. Private Fromm is to know nothing of the ready-fire orders. The word "apple" will be the signal to fire, if I decide it is necessary to destroy the ship. Is that all clear?"

"Yes, sir."

The door closed quietly behind her, and Bob Schwartz stood up and walked around the desk to shake the Commander's hand.

"They say you're a great man, Bill," he said quietly. "I'm beginning to think you are. Now, I'd like to ask a favor I'm not entitled to. I did my duty as I saw it, and gave you my advice as an officer of the S.D. Now I'm asking for a privilege as an old friend. If you're going to try bringing that ship in, I'd like to be aboard her on the way. I want to be there when they come to. I'm a qualified observer and it shouldn't take more than an hour to get me up there. It won't be much of a delay."

The Commander's voice was icy. "I think you know that's impossible, Bob. Certainly you're qualified—too qualified. We have to have a man on that ship, but we only need one man, and he has to be expendable. The only qualifications he needs are to know how to pilot the ship, and to be able to talk continuously. We already have a volunteer for the job, and he's acceptable. If you want to give him any instructions about what to look for or what to talk about, you have five minutes to prepare them. After that, the action will start. You understand, I am taking your advice. But I feel I must first prove to myself that your premises are correct. I want to see just how irresistible they are."

He turned to the P.R. Chief, and went on as coldly: "You are free to leave now, Miss Ardin. You'll want to hear the reports as they come in, I imagine. It should be about twenty minutes before the ship is actually under way."

Pfc. Joe Fromm walked through the inner airlock into the BB-3, climbed out of his space suit, and made a quick examination of the cabins. Three of the aliens, still unconscious, were bound ankle to ankle and wrist to wrist on the floor of one cabin. That door was to be locked. The other cabin was empty, as it was supposed to be.

"Cabins okay as planned," he muttered into the mouthpiece, strapped to his chest. "Corridor and cabinets clear." He entered the control room, and tested the manacles restraining the outside limbs of the alien who had formerly occupied the pilot's seat, and was now secured in a specially built chair. "Alien in

control room unconscious and I'd say pretty safe, the way he's tied down. Instrument check: electronic controls, okay; radar, okay; rocket controls . . ."

He went down the list, cheerful with the familiar routine, talking easily, untroubled by the need for extra breaths between words that had plagued his inspection of the aliens.

"I am now strapping myself into the pilot-seat, and preparing for takeoff. Ready to leave as soon as I am signaled free . . . signal received, blasting off now ... utilizing minimum acceleration, coming in at Deimos on direct approach . . . the fella in the control room here seems to be wiggling his toes . . . you wouldn't think they'd have toes just like us, would you? . . . he's coming to, all right . . . I am on direct course to Deimos at min-axe still . . . I think maybe everything'll work out okay . . ."

He had to watch the instruments with one eye and the alien with the other. The—whatever he was—didn't seem to be trying to bust loose at all.

"He's moving his head now, and looking around ... looking at his handcuffs, and the chair, trying to turn his head around to see where his legs are cuffed underneath, but he isn't struggling at all . . . looking me over now . . . I caught his eye for a minute just then, or he caught mine. I think he wants me to look at him again, but I'll try not to. He has to be able to fasten my attention on something to hypnotize me, doesn't he? I am moving my eyes around, checking instruments, and thinking as many different thoughts as I can. . . ."

"We are now approaching an orbit around Mars, decelerating. My radar screen shows two Scanliters following us . . . should they be so close inside range in case it is necessary to fire on us? . . . Please don't . . . that's not my thought!"

"It . . . he's thinking at me . . . they are telepaths, all right. He doesn't seem to, I don't know, the first thought I was sure wasn't mine was, please don't fire on us, we are friends. It seemed so natural I started to say it. His thoughts aren't in clear words now ... I heard once that to 'receive' stuff like this you have to not concentrate . . . something like that. Maybe I'm trying too hard . . . No. I'm too tense ... that was his thought, not mine, he was telling me not to be so tense and I'd understand. . . ."

"He says—you can call it 'says'; it's enough like talking—he says they're friends, they like us. They want to be friends. He keeps saying it different ways but it's the same feeling all the time, with different—pictures, I guess to go with it. . . ."

Pictures! Hey, stay out of there!

"He wants me to . . . to love him. That's what he says. He . . . men don't feel that way about each other . . . no! . . . loves me, he loves all—not men, some kind of thought for his own people, and all—living creatures—those are on his home planet. He loves all men, this time he means men."

That was silly of me . . . he wasn't being nasty . . . he just meant love . . . that picture was mine ...

"He says the pictures I get for meanings are all my own, so I might get his meaning wrong sometimes. He makes a picture in his mind, the way he'd visualize a thought on his world, but I see it the way it would be on mine. . . ."

"Listen, Captain Malcolm just didn't understand. This is important . . . they don't mean the kind of thing we do when they say 'love.' They mean liking and sharing and . . . we haven't got the right words for it, but it's all right. It's not a grabby feeling, or taking anything, or hurting anybody. There's nothing to be afraid of. The only thing that Captain got right was that story about the kid. . . ."

On Phobos Base, Lucy Ardin's typer clacked eagerly, while Bill Hartson and Bob Schwartz turned from the viewer together. Hartson was a soldier; his face was stern and set, as he reached for the mike. The only emotion he showed was the single flash from his eyes to his friend's when he looked at Schwartz and saw the tears of frustration rolling unashamed down the psychoofficer's face.

"... the one who threw the note over the wall. That is the way they feel. He's telling me now, to tell all of you, he's agreeing, he says I understand now, it's the way human beings love when they're kids, like the note the girl wrote: Whoever you are . . ."

The Commander spoke one word. "Apple."

"I love you."