

GIMMICK

BY KATHERINE MACLEAN

When an individual thinks he'll lose the fight, he runs. When he thinks he can win the fight, he attacks. And neither one of these actions really requires, thinking. But there's nothing so effective as a complete and total stalemate to induce cogent, rational thinking!

Illustrated by Vidmer

A distant boom rattled the corridor. Bob Calland passed the ammunition and sucked a cut finger, tired and sweaty, his arms aching from the weight of the small heavy space torpedoes. He wondered briefly if he should recommend that torpedoes have rough sides for gripping, and then had the further precise thought that whatever his answer to such problems, they would not appear on a report.

Any ship whose loading system was cut in the first enemy blow was not going to survive. That included him.

It was amusing that the small spaceship had come out merely to target test a new homing rocket that was supposed to be effective against the evasive speed of Furry ships. In the stories it was inventions which saved everything at the last minute.

The loading stopped inexplicably, and he straightened and stood breathing deeply, counting the probable time left to the crippled ship. It was very little.

"Time to invent another gizmo," said Calland, and laughed hysterically for five minutes, at the end of which time the badly disco-ordinated loading system resumed flow and he passed some more ammunition.

The air pressure began to drop and the hollow boom of slamming air-compartment walls came closer. The spaceship was being carved apart, its insides opened out to the airlessness of space.

Ten minutes later it was all over. Bob Calland found himself in the dark with a feeling of falling slowly from a great height which slowly became the familiar sensation of weightless floating. The ship's spin had stopped somewhere in a dimly remembered interval of jolts and dizzy spinning of walls, with the lights flickering on and off and tremendous bewildering noise. The air was thin, but it was still there; he could still breathe. And the noise had stopped. The Furies had the ship.

He wondered if they were searching through it for survivors, and remembered that he had the insignia of a high-ranking technical officer, the rank they had assigned him for mobility as an observer from a Design Research and Testing base. If they found him, they would question him. If they had noticed that the few torpedoes they had ducked seemed to be of a new design, they might be specifically searching for the observer. They might be looking for him. With a minimum of motion he began stripping off the insignia from his sleeves.

The motion set him spinning weightlessly. In the dark his hand brushed clothing that was not his. Someone else's clothing. It was completely unexpected, for he had had no feeling of anyone being close to him. As he yanked his hand back reflexively his fingers brushed across something else that felt like soft lumpy leather. With instinctive revulsion, he pushed, and something heavy and limp gave inertly and drifted away.

A dead man.

His throat went stiff and his neck hair prickled, but he saw the practical aspects of what he had found, and he forced himself to think about what he should do. He and the body were drifting away from each other now. It had insignia on its shirt sleeve which would indicate a man who would not know enough to be worth questioning. He had to find it in the dark and change shirts.

Calland waited until he drifted into contact with the opposite wall, then pushed himself back in the direction he had pushed the corpse.

After he had left contact with it he realized that the wall had been warm, almost hot, and flat instead of curved like the usual corridor walls. It was one of the air-preserving walls which had fallen between himself and the rest of the ship, and something was heating it on the other side. It was possible that the Furries were on that side, cutting through. He floated in darkness and silence as thick as black cotton. If they were cutting through the walls to get at him, why the eerie silence?

Absolute darkness. Drifting, he stretched his hands out before him, steeling himself against the fear of that dry soft leather touch he had felt before.

Then he wondered if he had turned without feeling the turn, and had a sudden conviction that he was stretching his hands towards where he had been, drifting backward into the embrace of a dead body. He began to swing his arms in sudden panic, just as his left shoulder touched something smooth and flat and searingly cold. Before he could check himself, an elbow jolted into the cold surface and shoved him away from contact.

He drifted, spinning around and around in the dark, his shoulder tingling from the icy contact.

That had been a wall. But it had been too cold.

Almost as cold as space.

He realized then the reason for the silence. There was no sound from the remainder of the ship because the remainder of the ship was gone. The small boxed-off section of corridor where he was was floating alone, a fragment of ship in the frigid cold of space, heated on one side by the violence of unshielded sunlight.

That meant he wouldn't have to change his shirt with the corpse. He relaxed and floated numbly without thinking. In the dark, cold and silence he could have slept or been unconscious without noticing when he slept or woke. Sometimes he would feel a wave of heat or chill just before he drifted into a wall in the dark, and would shove off hastily from a surface that would cling to his fingers as he touched it, scorching with either heat or cold.

He did not expect to be rescued.

Eleven hours later he was picked up and treated for scorch and frostbite and given hot drinks and soup, and allowed to take a long comfortable hot bath.

After he was dressed, combed and comfortable he still felt odd, as if something permanent had happened to him. He looked soberly at himself in the mirror for a while, trying to find a difference in his face, then gave up curiosity on the subject and called base.

A husky blond woman appeared on the screen, with a calibrator in one hand. "Calland!" she spread her arms in a gesture of embracement.

"Hello, Della," he smiled a little.

"They told us there wasn't anything left of the ship but small-sized pieces, and it looked as though the Furries had towed away the control cabin to examine the gizmo. We thought the Furries had you." She looked worried to illustrate. They said there weren't any pieces big enough for survivors. Where did you go, boy?"

"I was in a small piece." He found himself smiling again, without it touching the frozen feeling somewhere inside.

She inspected his face. "As long as it's one piece at a time, we don't mind. How about transferring back to base and designing where it's safe? You're too productive a man to be floating around in pieces."

She added, "Especially in small pieces."

In peace time he had been working on better self-accommodating electronic readers to make punched tapes for controlling machine tools to produce machinery accurate in the fitting of its parts from inaccurate and approximate blueprints. And as his special love he had been applying self-accommodating and proportioning to a console color player which made unified color compositions from the sound of symphonies.

He stated his feeling more precisely than he had understood it before. "I don't like weapons."

"Then why test them?" She was startled, but saw the answer in what she knew of managing idea men.

"O.K., I see it. No like . . . can't think . . . not top thinking anyhow. Go ahead and test, you know what you're doing. But don't let the Furrries get you."

She was about to switch off, but thought of something. Did you hear the radio flash? We bombed the Furry settlement on Illar four hours ago. Retaliation for those beam swaths their cruiser cut across New Boston. The bombs left that settlement flattened out. It didn't have any defenses that worked."

He felt cold suddenly, his skin numbing again, understanding what would happen next, where he would not have understood before. Most of humanity was unused to the simple logic of catastrophe. He had two cousins and a girl friend in New Boston, the city nearest to the Furry planetary group. "What did we do that for? What is that supposed to do for us?"

She was indignant. "It will show the Furrries that they'll find life easier if they stick to the rules of civilized warfare and leave cities and civilians alone."

Knowing that he was being absolutely accurate, with the certainty of pointing out that the sun will rise, he said, "They are going to send a cruiser back to New Boston and burn it as flat as a piece of burnt toast." He added, "As a lesson to *us* not to attack cities and civilians. Someone I know lives there."

The handsome blond woman looked whiter than usual, as if the tone of his voice had made it seem real.

He began to follow a glimmer of thought, some kind of a pattern that was thinking he had done and forgotten in the long wait in the corridor. "What would happen if we tried to bomb a human city?"

She was used to having research thinkers asking rhetorical questions to bounce their ideas from her. "They'd turn on their EG screen. Our bombs couldn't touch it."

"What if the Furrries had the EG screen?"

"That isn't likely. Everyone agrees the EG screen was discovered as a fluke. Two centuries of study and we still don't know why it operates." She abandoned abstract discussion. "We have a new wrinkle in a distant spaceship spotter, uses information probabilities to reconstruct shapes. It's already on its way out with the fleet to be tested, but we'd rather you did it. Check it at maximum range for shape discriminations."

When he picked it up it was a built-over civilian sportster. He reported in to the fleet command on the way there and was relayed to scout command who informed him that a Furry cruiser had been seen outside of the system heading in toward Mark II, and he was temporarily assigned scout work to test the new device in action.

Calland ranged in space, scanning the arc that had been assigned to him. The sportster, though small, was comfortable and warm and well lit, and a bell rang on the screen whenever anything of ship shape registered, so that he did not have to watch constantly, but could look up from whatever else he was doing. He passed his time reading light magazines, occupying the surface of his mind.

Whenever he read the same paragraph over and over for more than a minute he became curious and checked the current of his thoughts to see what prevented him from concentrating. It was always the same problem. How could he smuggle himself inside a Furry cruiser?

The plans he thought of were difficult, devious, and unlikely, representing the fact that the problem was not easy. He discarded them for one reason or another, and immediately began to think up another.

It occurred to him that his single-minded concentration was fanatical, and a psychotherapist would object to it. And it also occurred to him, with equal logic, that this abnormal concentration was very likely to find an answer, if there were any answer.

The Furry cruiser, when it came, came in from an angle which was a long way from his sector. The scouts were well placed, and the radio announcements of the cruiser's position and direction preceded it and widened on either side like a bow wave. His was the eighth scout to send in the cruiser's course co-ordinates, but they were taken from a distance supposedly completely out of range of ordinary detection, and he continued to keep the screen focused on the cruiser, following it in towards his planet by screen only, since the scouts were ordered to continue scouting their sectors and report any further appearance of ships.

The ship was huge on Calland's screen, bristling with slice beam antenna, many times as big as a

human ship, and, he knew, almost impregnable to projectiles. Not one had been captured or inspected, and the secret of the slice beam was not known. The ships seemed close to being floating cities, and there were so few of them that the theory was that these were the ships the Furies had entered the star cluster in as colonists a generation back.

The cruiser went by at normal speed, coasting silently without radio static, an impressive murderous sight. Calland knew that it was equipped so that its crew could withstand accelerations and quick turns of maneuvering almost a third faster than the best ship of humanity, and that they were so well powered for their weapon that the ship could stand off out of projectile range and carve the smaller ships into chunks before they could get close enough to begin fighting.

Besides the compulsive drive of his plans, there was curiosity. A Furry cruiser would be a treasure trove of new gimmicks inside. The problem was, how could he get into one?

The commander of the fleet had some similar idea. He was supposedly organizing his defenses merely to keep the cruiser from getting through to Mark II, but the Furry ship instead ran into a trap.

Row on row of ships, half the fleet, ranked one behind the other in eight rows, the heads of the lines pointing directly at the approaching cruiser so that each line seemed only to be one ship on the enemy's screens.

They did not seem a threat, although they approached from different directions, for they could be easily dodged or beam-sliced before they came within projectile range. The cruiser coasted on.

On Calland's special screen, with information-corrections removing all the waver and uncertainty of distance, the lines of ships converged on the Furry at high speed, like eight arrows. They held complete radio silence, but at the planned moment every second ship of every arrow veered slightly to one side. There were two arrows where each had been before, again half of each veered and there were from sixteen arrows, thirty-two, then sixty-four ships, visible on the-Furry screen, in range of the Furry beams, some of them caught and falling apart like sliced apples, but still coming with momentum, converging on the single huge cruiser. One more sidewise thrust and then there were no more lines, only individual ships which finished the pattern with an outflinging of mines around them, and it was done.

The Furry ship was totally engulfed in a tightening sphere of ships and mines — with a command to surrender thundering on its radio. Nothing could save it but the EG projectile screen thrown around them from outside. The message to surrender promised it if they ceased fire and opened their ports immediately. The one other time a Furry was crippled badly enough to be abandoned the crew took off in a lifeboat and the ship immediately melted down behind them leaving no informative pieces, but this time there was no place for the crew to go.

They ignored the warning. Beaming slice rays destructively in all directions the huge cruiser was flung forward in a wild dash to escape — plowed through a wall of mines in a series of rending explosions and scattered itself across dark space in a smear of red glowing fragments and white flashes.

From his great distance Bob Calland saw the attempt to capture the cruiser only in a fragmentary way, and pieced it together. There was the distant sight of the perfect converging formation, outlined on the new screen in unnatural geometric clarity. His radio picked up a hubbub of orders, sputters of static and muffled clangs and booms as the radio silence welt off, and his intercom televiewer was segmented for a view from the view-plate of the major battleships in a fragmentary montage of tiny pictures.

Tensely Calland sat watching them register flares and splashes of light, and blink on and off, and some suddenly shift to that blank white which meant they were no longer transmitting. Almost half of them went in the first eight minutes.

In the viewscreens of the battleships still transmitting Calland saw the Furry cruiser try to plow through the mines, saw the separating rear half visible in the flare of explosions and then in one large red explosion saw the pieces scatter outward from the explosion of the ship's drive in a starfished-shaped trail of minebursts.

The mines had been set to go off only on contact with the typical alloy of the Furry's hull, and they went off on contact with any sized piece, making small pieces into smaller pieces.

While he was still staring at the screen a priority call came through on his sound system.

"Continue at alert. All technical ratings not immediately essential to the operation of intact ships stand by for repair duty. All technical ratings registered as capable of cybernetic and computer control-board repair report individually for temporary reassignment." There were more instructions to others, but he ignored them as he turned his sportster toward the distant planet Mark II and the wreckage-strewn area of battle. Being a cybernetic designer he had been rated a qualified repair man when they gave him his uniform.

The organization behind the succession of orders that came over the general call system sounded remarkably organized and flexible for a command which in the separate planets settled by humanity had no tradition of handling any more than a small, six-ship fleet, the economic maximum for any planet in its small political quarrels with its neighbors. And the situation in which ships were badly damaged and crews killed in large numbers in spite of the EG screen was something for which there was no precedent.

He was a civilian and had gathered his expectations from the popular stories of military life, which treated the usual—almost harmless—war with the enthusiasm of a football game. Still it seemed to him that the new organization of the fleet was unmilitary, almost civilian, but flexible and efficient. The possible uses of every man and his whereabouts was kept track of by an organization that was, in operation, mainly skillfully used classifying machines, and electric card sorters.

The human factor was in the commander. The battle had been organized as a colossal gamble. If the experts could not find valuable information in the wreckage of the Furry ship, half the fleet had been thrown away for nothing.

The place where they most hopefully searched for an undamaged piece of Furry ship was the englobed area near where it had exploded. Any part which had not received enough blast to be flung away would probably have been both protected from the blast and large enough to be inert.

Calland with two other cyb men were working on the controls of the command ship. They were in the process of repairing a beam slice through the wiring of the control board when the Furry was brought in.

He had been found snugly protected in the ship's lifeboat, crouched in its shock tank, an officer reported to the commander. The craft had been still surrounded by a remnant of its launching cradle, which showed it had never taken off. Whether the Furry was in the lifeboat because of a higher degree of importance or a lower degree of courage than the members of the Furry crew who had died in their spaceship was not possible to determine by his face. He stood straight and stared around with the Furry equivalent of a glower.

The commander glowered back good-naturedly. He was highly pleased. "Well, we got something anyway," he said to the officers around him. "What we need now is the medical department, the intelligence department, a translator and one or two weapon scientists." He went back to taking reports and giving orders over the televiewer, listening to a solid wall of televiewer screens, his feet spread and planted like an admiral on deck.

In his six-ship command before he found himself with the combined fleets of humanity under him, he had been able to handle everything and apparently he clung to the habit although there was a staff of officers behind him to whom he could have delegated almost everything that needed to be done. The hubbub from the screens was almost overwhelming, but he seemed to enjoy it.

Calland, watching, finished welding two broken ends of wire and wondered what to do with a printed circuit plate which had broken across. The parts bin was in an airless punctured section of the ship. He postponed the question and sorted out some more scrambled wire ends.

"Where's the medico?" demanded the commander, turning. "Where's the translator? How long do we stand around and wait? "

Officers made apologetic noises and ran around making hurry-up calls to various departments.

Calland welded wire ends and inspected the Furry with admiration. Furies were human-seeming, but taller, and covered with mouse gray fur. This one was exceptionally strong looking, with brown wide eyes accentuated by dark brown fur stripes; the two vertical stripes on his forehead running up over his

head and down his back. He had seen Furies before the quarrel began, and had liked them as most people did, because they seemed more direct and naïve, because they were honest, and because they had no arts but operatic singing, and admired human arts, and because of some engaging quality in their open childish pride in having bigger shinier machines.

However in wartime their having bigger shinier machines made a difference. As long as the war was fought with machines—

The Furies he had seen had always worn respirator clips over their noses. This one did not and yet seemed to have no trouble breathing. Calland remembered that the respirators were unnecessary: the Furies used them only to protect themselves against the subtle smell of green growing plants and of men which pervades the air wherever man settled, and wherever plants were used for air purification. To their alien chemistry these odors were an obnoxious penetrating stench. The Furry, respiratorless, was wrinkling his dark snub nose with an occasional involuntary twitch.

The medico came in and had the captive sit down while being examined.

"Is he all right?" asked the commander, turning his head from the yammering video screens.

"Healthy so far. He needs a respirator."

"I know. He's supposed to have one." The commander lifted his voice. "Where's the respirator?"

Beside Calland another cyb tech murmured irritably. "But the medico doesn't care if *I'm* healthy. They dragged me out of quarantine to send me over here. If I didn't take pills, I'd have a hundred and two fever, and I have the itch, and everyone thinks it's funny." He scratched his neck.

"What did you say you have?" asked Calland, slightly alarmed. He leaned away and checked the resistance of a weld at arm's length from the man.

"Chicken pox," the man said with sadistic glee. "You'll probably get it. It's an old children's disease in the planets of the cluster. The planets around here probably never had it because they quarantined the settling trips. It makes you itch for two days." He scratched with a hand holding a soldering iron and said "Ouch," absently as the iron waved near skin. "What do you say the chances are that the bohunk knows anything?"

Calland ran a rough weld through a gadget that smoothed it to the right bore. "Not good. Choose a man at random out of a human crew and the chances are that he can't tell you what makes the air lock open and close, let alone why the guns fire."

The prisoner was talking to a translator and the translator was talking to the commander and the calls were buzzing and talking and piling up on the commander's screens behind him. "Where are some physicists or electrical engineers," the commander demanded indignantly. "I can't understand this gabble honk!"

Beside Calland the man with chicken pox muttered something to himself like, "not in quarantine. Let em *all* itch," and stepped rapidly in front of Calland and the other cyb electronics men who were beginning to put their tools down to volunteer. To the commander he said soothingly, "I'm qualified, sir," and took the arm of the translator. "Let's find some place to sit down and talk with this fellow."

He looked at the doctor. "Can he take questioning?"

"What kind of questioning?" the doctor asked suspiciously, and turned to the commander. "He's not in good shape sir, he needs a trip to the infirmary. The air isn't doing him any good."

"Where the deuce is that respirator?" There was a muttered explanation from one of the officers. "Making one?" Another muttered in answer. The commander looked around from face to face earnestly as though asking information. "Who thought of storing everything essential in one place where the enemy could wreck it all with a single beam?" He waved at the medic. "Take him away and take care of him. The respirator will be sent over."

In four days, Calland learned, they had determined the Furry's name, place of origin, and military rank—he was a mess-steward, able to give full details on the food preparation machinery in the Furry

cruisers—before he died. The exact cause of the Furry's death wasn't determined the questioning hadn't had any reason to be of the type that might have caused it. The medical department had been overworked with other things, and by the fourth day the men weren't in a mood to be concerned about the death by rather sudden collapse of one Furry.

In exact congruence with Calland's prediction, the Furry cruisers had paid a return visit to New Boston. It had been obliterated from the face of the planet a day earlier, with a loss of life which had not even been estimated. "We should wipe them out!"

Calland's idea completed itself. The man's viciousness confirmed his decision. He added a few more grotesque strokes to the drawing on his notebook. "Pardon me, Mac, I've got to put a quick call through to a designing base."

Impressed, the engineer withdrew. While he was waiting for the call to go through Calland pulled another sheet of paper over to him and began carefully to draw, making mechanical notations along the side, glancing occasionally at the grotesque little sketch on the notebook.

The energetic blonde appeared on the screen as the call went through. He said, "Della, have you any faith in my judgment?"

"Plenty."

"There's a rough drawing and description I'm going to teleprint to the custom construction department. No matter how it looks, don't call an idea conference to fix it up, just have them build it the way it is. When you see it, just say to yourself you have faith."

"Anything you design will look reasonable."

"Ha!" he said sinisterly, and cut the connection to make his next call to the construction department.

After that call he made one to the head of the radar department requesting transfer back to design base for work on a new weapon design. The request went through and was confirmed with unusual speed. Four hours later he was given a telestat of his transfer papers.

On the way back the video screen rang for him and Della's face appeared on it.

"You're insane," she said.

"Probably," he smiled slightly.

"Any reason why I shouldn't sic the brain doctors on you and have you hospitalized?"

She meant it, he saw. The question was a bad shock, for any such interference would cause more delay than he felt he could stand. He had to explain the thing they were building.

"It's a blind," he said. "A booby trap to keep the Furry scientists puzzling and distract their attention from the real weapon."

"Hm-m-m," she looked uncertain. "Where's this real weapon?"

"I'll install it tomorrow when I get there. And alone. The blueprints I'll file with you in a sealed envelope, but there's no point in the base having them until I test it and find out if it works."

"I'll back you up," she decided, and looked at him quizzically, but switched off without asking anything.

The next day when he landed at base he picked up a large box full of some kind of apparatus from the storage section of his workroom, trundled it in to the room where his new "weapon" was waiting, built into a small sized commutercraft, and locked the door securely.

Then he climbed into the craft and relaxed in the control seat with the *Journal of Chemopsychic Research*. At noon he took lunch from a corner of the box and ate it, and then took his temperature.

At three o'clock he felt slightly dizzy and took his temperature again. It was a fever. He said, "I thought so," and took some antifever pills and did not say anything else, because he had made up his mind about this long ago; but began loading the contents of the box on board the small spacecraft.

Two hours later he was out in space. He set his course co-ordinates and began to unpack tools.

The screen buzzed and when he cut it in the face of Della appeared. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To test it."

"Testing is supposed to be done on planetoids. You're heading for the Furry system."

"I can't test a psychological weapon on rocks."

"True enough," she looked at him, inspecting his face with respect. "Even insane, you have guts enough. Well, have luck." She switched off.

He was alone again. From his box he took out the works of one of his color-sound co-ordinators and plugged it in near the control board. He amused himself having it play colors in response to the tones of his voice while he took out a theramin and wired the two in together neatly. Now when he moved the motion was turned into sound by the theramin and the sound into color by the color-composer. Surrounded by a rippling play of colors, bathed in sound, and grinning, he wired the whole works into the ground ends of the meaningless antenna that decorated the outside of the communtercraft. He turned the volume down and wired more things into more things, in good logical-seeming patterns, nowhere contradicting intelligent patterns of wiring or doing anything which would make an appearance of slipshod work.

Then he went back to reading magazines, the cabin walls a quiet dancing of color in delicate, subtle patterns, responding to the sound of his breathing and the rustle of turning pages.

When the Furry planetary system came near he began to watch the radar screen. He passed the outmost blinker rocks of the Furry system, navigator's guides which swung a radar beam as a lighthouse guide to safe routes and a detector of incoming strangers.

A few minutes past the first one and he knew he had been observed, for the randomly swinging beam swung back and focused on his ship. Somewhere on a planet a long way ahead the relayed signal had reached a screen and been seen by a Furry observer.

The radar beams picked him out and followed him like suspicious eyes as he passed one blinker after another, as somewhere in the direction he was going Furies gathered around the screens to stare, and orders were given.

Abruptly his ship-scanning screen, which had been making meaningless geometric patterns from random static, picked up definite ship shapes somewhere and focused on them. A view of spaceships swung up in magnification to total clarity. Their movements were oddly uncertain. One started in his direction then swung around again and grouped in with others in a battle formation before a planet — true defenders.

But then the entire battle formation, as though taking courage in numbers, moved forward again. They accelerated as though planning to intercept him before he came near any planet he might damage.

He knew how his speedster looked on the screen. It was a weird jumble of coils and antenna sticking out randomly in any direction. At the nose of the craft was a parabolic bowl which blew bubbles. In it grew blue glowing spheres which expanded and thinned and vanished slowly as they grew while another tiny blue sphere appeared in the bottom and began to expand.

It must at that moment have had all the available physicists in the fleet staring fascinated into their screens, cursing the failures of clarity in the relayed blinker rock pickup, worried and disconcerted because they could not think of any weapon it could be, probably speculating about spherical force fields and other such improbabilities, looking wildly for an explanation that would fit.

They would become more worried looking for an answer, because they would not find one. It was not a weapon, merely a pinpoint ooze of hydrogen into an ionizer.

The fleet advanced toward him rapidly, their slice beams already focused in the direction they expected to first see him in their own screens.

Nervously he put on a spacesuit, fumbling with haste, although there was no need for haste yet. There was little chance of a beam striking any craft out of sighting range, and with his spacesuit, if the craft were sliced into by a beam, there would still be no danger to him unless the beam nicked his spacesuit. The theramin followed his motions with disconcerted jerky flute notes, and he forced himself to relax and move more slowly as he sat. He flicked on the antenna circuits where they led into the color player and then swung back to watch the nine monstrous cruisers accelerating towards him.

They assumed it was an attempt to sneak past the defenses and inflict vengeance on one of their planets for what had been done to New Boston. They were rushing forward to defend their home

population and crush the menace quickly before it could come within range of their cities.

Except for a penknife in his inner shirt pocket, Calland and his speedster were unarmed and defenseless. He judged that they were close enough to be seen on ordinary radar, and swerved the craft slightly as if he had just seen them, then smiling reached to a special switch and turned on the display. Four colors of neon and fluorescent tubing flashed on and showed themselves wrapped in a gigantic and brilliant helix. At the spectacular sight the great speeding cruisers scattered like a covey of quail at the sight of a hunter and fled back toward the planets and the protection of its satellite based beams.

The commanders had been faced with the same choice as the human commander of the week before. What if the helix could destroy ships? Would it be worth losing the entire fleet to defend one planet?

Furry thinking was never very rapid, but it came to logical conclusions. Halfway back to their sheltering planetary bases, one of the eight ships. swerved off and turned to face the mysterious helix, a suicide volunteer to test the efficacy of its weapons and give the others some warning of what to expect from the incredible thing which rushed at them.

Here I come with my secret weapon, thought Calland, stepping on the jet pedal. *Here I come to be questioned, all wrapped up like a Christmas package. You wanted to question me, and now you are going to do it.*

Behind him the color player had begun to play colors in response to the shifting magnetic lines of the planetary fields they were approaching, with faster rhythms that were minor ripples of current on the hull and the leakage of current from the surface of the neon tubing, a sequence of ripples and polka dot flashes over the slow color changes of the magnetic lines. He gave it a quick glance now and then, admiring its mechanical attempt to organize a symphonic composition out of something random. The theramin let out a mooring horn note in response to each turn of his head. He waved a free hand from the controls up and down in a rapid sweep and was rewarded by a fire engine's wail.

Under the other sounds an alarm bell began to jangle quietly, meaning that the Furry cruiser that was waiting for him had come within range and was opening fire, slicing at the speedster with its beams, finding the range.

The accident was ready. And it would be plausible.

He stood up half out of the pilot's chair and swung the wheel a sharp turn to the right. The craft bucked and surged to the side with an obedient roar of side jets and as the jolt began to throw him to one side he grabbed at a bundle of wiring neatly cased in a transparent cable case, grabbing as if to save himself. He hung on for a moment against the rocket roar and the sidewise surge of the ship and then the wiring began to rip loose from its connections. There was a series of sharp sputters, a spattering of blue flashes, and a jolting *spat* which he could hear transmitted through the hull, as outside, in the helix around the ship, half of the tubing flared up to overburdened brightness and blew up with a lovely display of far-flung sparks, while the remainder went dead.

The color player coruscated in flashes of spattering pinks and greens and then the cabin went black as its wires pulled loose and Calland pitched across to the opposite wall with A handful of wires and landed against a shielded tesla coil.

The tesla coil sparked but did not blow out, and he lay comfortably in the dark a moment watching ripples of harmless high-tension surface electricity run across one spacesuited hand in brilliant blue fire, until the cabin fell apart in two neat halves on either side of him like a cleaved egg.

Then he was drifting, but it was not dark. He was floating in space surrounded by stars with the two halves of the speedster drifting away from him. He thought he saw another small section come away from one half and wondered if they were still slicing with the beam. The rueful thought came that with a slicer beam an extremely cautious Furry could make very small pieces of anything he distrusted, with few problems in reassembling the pieces for information afterward. *However,* he thought as he watched one half section of the cabin definitely separate into two smaller slices, *they wouldn't get much information by reassembling me.*

He decided that he did not like the suspense. It would be better to pretend to be knocked out and

close his eyes.

After a moment it was not pretending. Bob Calland had been overworking for days, had had a fever for which he usually forgot to take antifever tablets, he was tired, frightened, and had just gotten a good jolt on the head. Now suddenly there was nothing to do but wait with his eyes closed. He fell asleep.

He remained asleep until the Furies had him inside their ship and stretched out on a table.

When he woke up they were talking all around him with great excitement, and noticing he was awake, they began crowding one who was obviously the interpreter to interpret their questions.

"What did you try to do?" the interpreter asked. The engineers or tech men were not in the crowd, probably they were out bringing in the parts of the speedster and its strange equipment. Perhaps they were assuming that the prisoner had nothing to do with the design of his weapon, and would not be able to explain it.

"What was the thing for?" asked the interpreter.

Calland decided that the easiest way to give the impression he had secrets to keep was to look like he was keeping them. He looked at the interpreter defiantly and refused to speak.

After he had refused to answer polite requests and reassurances and refused to answer shouts they began to grow interested. What secrets could he be carrying of such importance that he dared not answer even a small question?

They set about finding out.

After he refused to answer under more careful coaxing and threats they began to grow annoyed and baffled, and tried to make their threats seem more sincere by punctuating them with slaps. They were inhibited by their own traditions of civilization, but felt a reasonable urgency to find out anything of importance to their survival. If it was a matter of life or death, they would choose to survive on any terms, even brutality.

The slaps grew heavier. Finally Calland decided that he had held out long enough to impress them and began to talk.

He sat on the edge of the table and answered questions, then when the engineers came in from their first attempt to piece his craft together he stood in the workroom of the cruiser where they had parked it and pointed to where circuits should go and how they should be wired and answered more questions.

There was no way they could check whether what he said was true or not, for they had no truth serums chemically fit for humans, but the wire endings seemed to match and look reasonable the way he had them do it, although the experts were increasingly puzzled about how it operated and what it did, and spent much time arguing with each other.

The questions came from an ever growing assortment of experts, some from the other ships of the fleet, and some he began to suspect were from the planets. They seemed increasingly intelligent and likable as their number grew. For two days he answered questions, telling the truth wherever possible, and in answer to questions about the purpose of his weapon, adding lie on lie, very carefully fitting them together in a logical sounding fantasy as a diverting game. He liked his questioners, and was sorry for them.

They were being pleasant to him, now that he was answering, and occasionally one would remark to him that he was a civilized person; that, judging by their warfare, they had come to expect all Balds to be savages. He did not comment on this, merely made friendly remarks back and tried to tell the mathematicians the basic formula of the EG field.

After a time he found a young one versed in the right branch of electronics so that he found it easy to interpret the interpreter's vague translation. Calland buttonholed him and forced him to listen long enough to get the entire equation and the basic design.

The others were impatient at the duration of his diversion from the essential business of instructing them in the secret weapon, but the young scientist Calland had confided it to went away rapidly, looking

preoccupied and intent on something he was planning to do. Calland hoped he had fully understood, and that he would pass on his information to other Furrries before it was too late.

Calland was sorry for him.

He was sorry for the crew, for every man of it had taken time off to see him during the first hours he was aboard. Every cyb weapon expert had been into the workroom to puzzle over the network that the engineers were trying to reassemble under his directions. By the end of the second day he had seen vague friendly Furrries enter who received so much deference and understood so much without questions, that he was sure that he was getting the cream of the theoreticians from the Furry planets, and he felt increasingly guilty.

At the end of the second day, under his directions they finished reassembling the speedster, interior and exterior, and were still unable to understand its function as a weapon.

They began to argue and discuss among themselves, and some came over and shouted vehemently in their own tongue that it could not work—it could not possibly work! There must be something wrong about the way it was assembled.

After a long discussion, after parts were taken apart and put together as before over and over, after parts were energized separately and watched in operation they wired the whole thing together again dubiously and suggested to Calland that he prove it was a weapon by turning it on.

He resisted, holding up his role, pointing out that it was dangerous. They did not believe but they arranged to be away from the danger area. Confronted with a threat Calland shrugged, walked over to the speedster, climbed in and switched everything on. It went on and flashed, coruscated and buzzed and shone with colors outwardly and inwardly as before, although the blue spheres could not be made without a vacuum. After twenty minutes he turned it off and climbed out again. Then the most important scientists came back from the distant ships where they had taken refuge and examined the films of what had happened and the graphs of radiations emitted, and declared that the thing was not a weapon, that all the flashing and glowing and cybernetic interplay produced nothing.

Calland shrugged and ceased to answer questions. When they found he would not speak it was suggested that they try beating him again, but this group was not of the same attitude as the first one and many were against it. After an arguing uproar they compromised and decided on bright light and no food or sleep, to wear his nerves down.

The night was not comfortable, but Calland found it easy to endure, for he was not inclined to sleep anyhow, knowing what was coming.

In the morning crew members began to die. All the officers were found dead first, and then the others began to drop. Calland walked out of the questioning room in the confusion of deaths and locked himself in some crewman's cabin and listened to the hoarse shouts and the feet running past the door. They were not looking for him. The shouts were of fear. They remembered that the weapon had been on the wake period before, and thought the deaths were from that. They were not sure that it was off, or if, once having been on, it remained on and killed men within its range apparently choosing them at random.

The cries and running feet emptied out of the ship into lifeboat rockets. The ship was abandoned.

Calland put his ear to the wall and heard no shuffle of movement left. He could hear his own breathing in the silence.

The ship was empty.

No other cruiser pursued him as he steered his captured Furry ship out of their planetary system and set it going in the direction of Mark II.

By the time he reached the Mark system and turned the ship over to Design and Research the Furrries had broadcast a surrender offer, and a desperate appeal to turn off the weapon, wherever it was, for, they explained, it was still killing, more and more every day.

Calland felt guilty. He had not been able to think of any way to warn them that it was a disease and still capture the ship.

The human alliance conferred on the surrender offer and agreed on vindictive and punishing terms equal to their angers and the wounds humanity had suffered in the unprecedented savagery of the war,

terms which were intended to humiliate the pride of the furred race.

By the time the terms were presented however, the Furrries had discovered that their deaths were from a virus disease, and had it successfully quarantined. A week later there was an EG field over every Furry city. They retracted their surrender offer, and prepared to defy and resist any attempt to enforce the peace terms of the humans.

Humanity's cities hastily put up the antibeam shield learned from the captured cruiser. Humanity's ships were equipped with anti-slicer beam shields which made them immune to Furry ship attack, and also were given slicer beams which turned out handy for target practice and mining asteroids, but could not get into shielded spaceships.

It was no longer possible for either side to materially hurt the other. "Civilized warfare" had returned. And so the war stopped.

Humanity and the Furrries gradually began to conduct business together and grew friendly again. Bob Calland prudently kept himself from being a target for the wrath of the surviving Furrries by claiming he had not expected to carry chicken pox; he had merely built a weapon which did not work, and so accidentally carried the disease. Without either assassination or acclaim, he was permitted to go back to his civilian trade of designing color composers and cybernetic blueprint translators which would punch machine tool control tapes for the building of accurate machines with interfitting parts from inaccurate sketched blueprints. He no longer had to float around in dark fragments of ship entangled with stiffening corpses, or look at the stacked bodies of furred fellow cyb and network techs. Being a civilian by nature and training, he had no stomach for people being dead anywhere where he could know about it. A psychotherapist cured him of nightmares about the dark, which for a time were somehow confused with an odd idea that the last war had gone differently and there was nothing left but corpses.

THE END