

THE ULTIMATE INVADER

by *Eric Frank Russell*

CHAPTER I

THE little ship, scarred and battered, sat on the plain and cooled its tubes and ignored the armed guard that had sur-rounded it at a safe distance. A large, bluish sun burned over-head, lit the edges of flat, waferlike clouds in brilliant purple. There were two tiny moons shining like pale specters low in the east, and a third was diving into the westward horizon.

To the north lay the great walled city whence the guard had erupted in irate haste. It was a squat, stark conglomeration of buildings in gray granite, devoid of tall towers, sitting four-square to the earth. An unbeautiful, strictly utilitarian place suitable for masses of the bumble living in subservience to the harsh.

At considerable altitude above the granite mass roamed its aerial patrol, a number of tiny, almost invisible dots weaving a tangle of vapor-trails. The dots displayed the irritated rest-lessness of a swarm of disturbed gnats, for their pilots were uncomfortably aware of the strange invader now sitting on the plain. Indeed, they would have intercepted it had that been possible, which it wasn't. How can one block the path of an unexpected object moving with such stupendous rapidity that its trace registers as a mere flick on a screen some seconds after the source has passed?

Upon the ground the troops kept careful watch and awaited the arrival of someone who was permitted the in-itiative that they were denied. All of them had either four legs and two arms or four arms and two legs, according to the need of the moment. That is to say: the front pair of under-body limbs could be employed as feet or hands, like those of a baboon. Superior life does not establish itself by benefit of brains alone; manual dexterity is equally essential. The quasi-quadrupeds of this world had a barely adequate supply of the former compensated by more than enough of the latter.

Although it was not for them to decide what action to take against this sorry-looking object from the unknown, they had plenty of curiosity concerning it, and no little apprehension. Much of their noseyness was stimulated by the fact that the vessel was of no identifiable type despite that they could recognize all the seventy patterns common to the entire galaxy. The apprehension was created by the sheer nonchalance of the

visitor's arrival. It had burst like a superswift bullet through the detector-screen that enveloped the entire planet, treated the sub-stratosphere patrols with disdain and sat itself down in clear view of the city.

Something drastic would have to be done about it, on that point one and all were agreed. But the correct tactics would be defined by authority, not by underlings. To make up his own mind one way or the other was a presumptuous task no one of them dared undertake. So they hung around in dips and behind rocks, and scratched and held their guns and hankered for high brass in the city to wake up and come running.

In much the same way that planetary defenses had been brought to naught by

bland presentation of an accomplished fact, so were the guards now disturbed by being confronted with an event when none were present who were qualified to cope. Giving distant sluggards no time to make up their minds and spring into action, the ship's lock opened and a thing came out.

As a sample of unfamiliar life he was neither big nor fear-some. A biped with two arms, a pinkish face and close-fitting clothes, he was no taller than any of the onlookers and not more than one-third the weight. A peculiar creature in no way redoubtable. In fact he looked soft. One could jump on him with all four feet and squash him.

Nevertheless one could not hold *him* entirely in contempt. There were aspects that gave one to pause and think. In the first place, he was carrying no visible weapons and, more-over, doing it with the subtle assurance of one who has reason to view guns as so much useless lumber. In the second place, he was mooching airily around the ship, hands in pockets, inspecting the scarred shell for all the world as if this landing marked a boring call on tiresome relatives. Most of the time he had *his* back to the ring of troops, magnificently indifferent to whether or not anyone chose to blow him apart.

Apparently satisfied with his survey of the vessel, he suddenly turned and walked straight toward the hidden watchers. The ship's lock remained wide open in a manner suggesting either criminal carelessness or supreme confidence, more probably the latter. Completely at peace with a world in the midst of war, he ambled directly toward a section of guards, bringing the need for initiative nearer and nearer, making them sweat with anxiety and creating such a panic that they forgot to itch.

Rounding a rock, he came face to face with Yadiz, a common trooper momentarily paralyzed by sheer lack of an order to go forward, go backward, shoot the alien, shoot himself, or do something. He looked casually at Yadiz as if different life-forms in radically different shapes were more common than pebbles. Yadiz became so embarrassed by his own futility that he swapped his gun from hand to hand and back again.

"Surely it's not that heavy," remarked the alien with complete and surprising fluency. He eyed the gun and sniffed.

Yadiz dropped the gun which promptly went off with an ear-splitting crash and a piece of rock flew into shards and something whined shrilly into the sky. The alien turned and followed the whine with his eyes until finally it died out.

Then he said to Yadiz, "Wasn't that rather silly?"

There was no need to answer. It was a conclusion Yadiz already had reached about one second before the bang. He picked up the gun with a foot-hand, transferred it to a real hand, found it upside-down, turned it right way up, got the strap tangled around his fist, had to reverse it to get the limb free, turned it right way up again.

Some sort of answer seemed to be necessary but for the life of him Yadiz could not conceive one that was wholly satisfactory. Struck dumb, he posed there holding his weapon by the muzzle and at arm's length, like one who has recklessly grabbed a mamba and dare not let go. In all his years as a trooper, of which there were more than several, he couldn't recall a time when possession of a firearm had proved such a handicap. He was still searching in vain for a verbal means of salvaging his

self-respect when another trooper arrived to break the spell.

A little breathless with haste, the newcomer looked askance at the biped, said to Yadiz, "Who gave you orders to shoot?"

"What business is it of yours?" asked the biped, coldly dis-approving. "It's his own gun, isn't it?"

This interjection took the arrival' aback. He had not expected another life-form to speak with the fluency of a native, much less treat this matter of wasting ammunition from the angle of personal ownership. The thought that a trooper might have proprietary rights in his weapon had never occurred to him. And now that he had captured the thought he did not know what to do with it. He stared at his own gun as if it had just miraculously appeared in his hand, changed it to

another hand by way of ensuring its realness and solidity. "Be careful," advised the biped. He nodded toward Yadiz "That's the way *he* started."

. Turning to Yadiz, the alien said in calm, matter-of-face tones, "Take me to Markhamwit."

Yadiz couldn't be sure whether he actually dropped the gun again or whether it leaped clean out of his hands. Anyway, it did not go off.

CHAPTER II

THEY met the high brass one-third of the way to the city. There was an assorted truckload ranging from two to five-comet rank. Bowling along the road on flexible tracks, the vehicle stopped almost level with them and two dozen faces peered at the alien. A paunchy individual struggled out from his seat beside the driver and confronted the ill-assorted pair. He had a red metal sun and four silver comets shining on his harness.

To Yadiz he snapped, "*Who* told you to desert the guard-ring and come this way?"

"Me," informed the alien, airily.

The officer jerked as if stuck with a pin, shrewdly eyed him up and down and said, "I did not expect that you *could* speak our language."

"I'm fully capable of speech," assured the biped. "I can read, too. In fact, without wishing to appear boastful, *I'd* like to mention that I can also write."

"That may be," agreed the officer, willing to concede a couple of petty aptitudes to the manifestly outlandish. He had another careful look. "Can't say that I'm familiar with your kind of life."

"Which doesn't surprise me," said the alien. "Lots of folk never get the chance to become familiar with us."

The other's color heightened. *With a show of* annoyance, he informed, "I don't know who you are or what you are, but you're under arrest."

"Sire," put in the aghast Yadiz, "he wishes to—"

"Did any one tell you to speak?" demanded the officer, burning him down with his eyes.

"No, sire. It was just that—"

"Shut up!"

Yadiz swallowed hard, took on the apprehensive expression of one unreasonably denied the right to point out that the bar-rel is full of powder and someone has lit the fuse.

"Why am I under arrest?" inquired the alien, not in the least disturbed.

"Because I say so," the officer retorted.

"Really? Do you treat all arrivals that way?"

"At present, yes. You may know it or you may not, but right now this system is at war with the system of Nilea. We're taking no chances."

"Neither are we," remarked the biped, enigmatically. "What do you mean by that?"

"The same as you meant. We're playing safe."

"Ah!" The other licked satisfied lips. "So you are what I suspected from the first, namely, an ally the Nileans have dug up from some very minor system that we've overlooked."

"Your suspicions are ill-founded," the alien told him. "How-ever, I would rather explain myself higher up."

"You will do just that," promised the officer. "And the explanation had better be satisfactory."

He did not care for the slow smile he got in reply. It ir-resistibly suggested that someone was being dogmatic and someone else knew better. Neither had he any difficulty in identifying the respective someones. The alien's apparently baseless show of quiet confidence unsettled him far more than he cared to reveal, especially with a dopey guard standing nearby and a truckload of brass looking on.

It would have been nice to attribute the two-legger's sang-froid to the usual imbecility of another life-form too dim-witted to know when its scalp was in danger. There were plenty of creatures like that: seemingly brave because unable to realize a predicament even when they were in it up to the neck. Many of the lower ranks of his own forces had that kind of guts. Nevertheless he could not shake off the uneasy feeling that this case was different. The alien looked too alert, too sharp-eyed to make like a cow.

Another and smaller truck came along the road. Waving it to a stop, he picked four two-comet officers to act as escort, shooed them into the new vehicle along with the biped who entered without comment or protest.

Through the side window he said to the officers, "T hold you personally responsible for his safe arrival at the interro-ga-tion center. Tell them I've gone on to the ship to see whether there's any more where he came from."

He stood watching on the verge while the truck reversed its direction, saw it roll rapidly toward the city. Then he ' clambered into his own vehicle which at once departed for the source of all the trouble.

Devoid of instructions to proceed toward town, return to the ship, stand on his head or do anything else, Yadiz leaned on his gun and patiently awaited the passing of somebody qualified to tell him.

The interrogation center viewed the alien's advent as less sensational than the arrival of a Joppelan five-eared munkster at the zoo. Data drawn from a galaxy was at the disposal of its large staff and the said information included descriptions of four hundred separate and distinct life-forms, a few of them so fantastic that the cogent material was more deductive than demonstrative. So far as they were concerned this sample brought the record up to four hundred and one. In another century's time it might be four hundred twenty-one or fifty-one. Listing the lesser lifes was so much routine.

Interviews were equally a matter of established rigmarole. They had created a standard technique involving questions to be answered, forms to be filled, conclusions to be drawn. Their ways of dealing with recalcitrants were, however, a good deal more flexible, demanding various alternative methods and a modicum of imagination. Some life-forms responded with pleasing alacrity to means of persuasion that other life-forms could not so much as sense. The only difficulty they could have with this specimen was that of thinking up an entirely new way of making him see reason.

So they directed him to a desk, giving him a chair with four arm-rests and six inches too high, and a bored official took his place opposite. The latter accepted in advance that the subject could already speak the local tongue or communi-cate in some other understandable manner. Nobody was sent to this place until educated sufficiently to give the required responses.

Switching his tiny desk-recorder, the interviewer started with, "What is your number, name, code, cipher or other verbal identification?"

"James Lawson."

"Sex, if any?"

"Male."

"Age?"

"None."

"There now," said the interviewer, scenting coming awk-wardness. "You must have an age."

"Must I?"

"Everyone has an age."

"Have they?"

"Look," insisted the interviewer, very patient, "nobody can be ageless."

"Can't they?"

He gave it up, murmuring, "It's unimportant anyway. His time-units are meaningless until we get his planetary data." Glancing down at his question sheet, he carried on. "Purpose of visit?" His eyes came up as he waited for the usual boring response such as, "Normal exploration." He repeated, "Pur-*pose* of visit?"

"To see Markhamwit," responded James Lawson.

The interviewer yelped, "*What?*", cut off the recorder and breathed heavily for a while. When he found voice again it was to ask, "You really mean you've come specially to see the Great Lord Markhamwit?"

"Yes."

He asked uncertainly, "By appointment?"

"No."

That did it. Recovering with great swiftness, the interviewer became aggressively officious and growled, "The Great Lord Markhamwit sees nobody without an appointment."

"Then kindly make one for me."

"I'll find out what can be done," promised the other, having no intention of doing anything whatsoever. Turning the re-corder on again, he resumed with the next question.

"Rank?"

"None."

"Now look here—"

"I said *none!*" repeated Lawson.

"I heard you. We'll let it pass. It's a minor point that can be brought out later." With that slightly sinister comment he tried the next question. "Location of origin?"

"The Solarian Combine."

Flip went the switch as the unlucky desk instrument again got put out of action. Leaning backward, the interviewer rubbed his forehead. A passing official glanced at him,

stopped.

"Having trouble, Dilmur?"

"Trouble?" he echoed bitterly. He mooned at his question sheet. "What a day! One thing after another! Now this!"

"What's the matter?"

He pointed an accusative finger at Lawson. "First he pre-tends to be ageless. Then he gives the motive behind his arrival as that of seeing the Great Lord without prior arrangement." His sigh was deep and heartfelt. "Finally, to top it all, he claims that he comes from the Solarian Combine."

"H'm! Another theological nut," diagnosed the passer-by. "Don't waste your time on him. Pass him along to the mental therapists." Giving the subject of the conversation a cold look of reproof he continued on his way.

"You heard that?" The interviewer felt for the recorder-switch in readiness to resume operation. "Now do we get on with this job in a reasonable and sensible manner or must we resort to other, less pleasant methods of discovering the truth?"

"The way you put it implies that I am a liar," said Lawson, displaying no resentment.

"Not exactly. Perhaps you are a deliberate but rather stupid liar whose prevarications will gain him nothing. Perhaps you may have no more than a distorted sense of humor. Or you may be completely sincere because completely deluded. We have had visionaries here before. It takes all sorts to make a universe."

"Including Solarians," Lawson remarked.

"The Solarians are a myth," declared the interviewer with all the positiveness of one stating a long-established fact.

"There are no myths. There are only gross distortions of half-remembered truths."

"So you still insist that you are a Solarian?"

"Certainly."

The other shoved the recorder aside, got up from his seat. "Then I can go no further with you." He summoned several attendants, pointed to the victim. "Take him to Kasine."

CHAPTER III

THE individual named Kasine suffered glandular maladjustment that made him grossly obese. He was just one great big bag of fat relieved only by a pair of deep-sunk but brilliantly glittering eyes.

Those optics looked at Lawson in much the same way that a cat stares at a cornered mouse. Completing the inspection, he operated his recorder, listened to a play-back of what had taken place during the previous interview.

Then a low, reverberating chuckle sounded in his huge belly and he commented, "Ho-ho, a Solarian! And lacking a pair of arms at that! Did you mislay them someplace?" Lean-ing forward with a manifest effort, he licked thick lips and added, "What a dreadful fix you'll be in if you lose the others also!"

Lawson gave a disdainful snort. "For an alleged mental therapist you're long overdue for treatment yourself."

It did not generate the fury that might well have been aroused in another. Kasine merely wheezed with amusement and looked self-satisfied.

"So you think I'm sadistic, eh?"

"Only at the time you made that remark. Other moments: other motivations."

"Ah!" grinned Kasine. "Whenever you open your mouth you tell me something useful."

"You could do with it," Lawson opined.

"And it seems to me," Kasine went on, refusing to be baited, "that you are not an idiot."

"Should I be?"

"You should! Every Solarian is an imbecile." He ruminated a moment, went on. "The last one we had here was a many-tendriled octoped from Quamis. The authorities on his home planet wanted him for causing an end-of-the-world panic. His illusion of Solarianism was strong enough to make the credulous believe it. But we aren't foolish octopedes here. We cured him in the end."

"How?"

Kasine thought again, informed, "If I remember aright, we fed him a coated pellet of sodium and followed it with a jar of water. Whereupon he surrendered his stupidities with much fuss and shouting. He confessed his purely Quamistic origin shortly before his insides exploded." Kasino wagged his head in patronizing regret. "Unfortunately, he died. Very noisily, too."

"Bet you enjoyed every instant of it," said Lawson. "I was not there. I dislike a mess."

"It will be worse when it's your turn," observed Lawson, eyeing the enormous body.

"Is that so? Well, let me tell—" He stopped as a little gong sounded in the depths of his desk. Feeling under the rim, he pulled out a small plug at the end of a line, inserted it

in an ear and listened. After a while he put it back, stared a' the other. "Two officers tried to enter your ship."

"That was foolish."

Kasine said heavily, "They are now lying on the ground outside, completely paralyzed."

"What did I tell you?" commented Lawson, rubbing it in, Smacking a fat hand on the desk, Kasine made his voice loud. "What caused it?"

"Like all your kind, they are allergic to formic acid," Law-son informed. "It's a fact I had ascertained in advance." He gave a careless shrug. "A shot of diluted ammonia will cure them and they'll never have rheumatics as long as they live."

"I want no abstruse technicalities," harshed Kasine. "I want to know what caused

it."

"Probably Freddy," thought Lawson, little interested. "Or maybe it was Lou. Or possibly Buzwuz."

"Buzwuz?" Kasine's eyes came up a bit from their fatty depths. He wheezed a while before he said, "The message informs that both were stabbed in the back of the neck by something tiny, orange-colored and winged. What was it?"

"A Solarian."

His self-control beginning to slip, Kasine became louder. "If you are a Solarian, which you are not, this other thing cannot be a Solarian too."

"Why not?"

"Because it is totally different. It has not the slightest resemblance to you in any one respect."

"Afraid *you're* wrong there."

"Why?"

"It is intelligent" Lawson examined the other as though curious about an elephant with a trunk at both ends. "Let me tell you that intelligence has nothing whatever to do with shape, form or size."

"Do you call it intelligent to stab someone in the neck?" asked Kasine, pointedly.

"In the circumstances, yes. Besides, the resulting condition is harmless and easily curable. That's more than you can say for *an* exploded belly."

"We'll do something about this." Kasine was openly irri-tated.

"It won't be easy. Take Buzwuz, for instance. Though he's small even for a bumblebee from Callisto, he can lay out six horses in a row before *he* has to squat down someplace and generate more acid."

"Bumblebee?" Kasine's brows tried to draw together over thick rolls of flesh. "Horses?"

"Forget them," advised Lawson. "You know nothing of either."

"Maybe not, but I do know this: they won't like it when we fill the ship with a lethal gas."

"They'll laugh themselves silly. And it won't pay you to make my vessel uninhabitable."

"No?"

"No! Because those already out of it will have to stay out. Most of the others will get out fast in spite of anything you can do to prevent their escape. After that, they'll have no choice but to settle down and live here. I would not like that if I were you. I wouldn't care for it one little bit."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Not if I were you which, fortunately, I am not. A world soon becomes mighty uncomfortable when you've got to share it with hard-to-catch enemies steadily breeding a thousand to your one."

Kasine jerked and queried with some apprehension, "Mean to say they'll actually remain here and increase that fast?"

"What else would you expect them to do once you've taken away their sanctuary? Go jump in the lake just to please you? They're intelligent, I tell you. They will survive even if they have to paralyze every one of your kind in sight and make it

permanent."

The gong clanged again. Inserting the ear-plug, Kasine listened, scowled, shoved it back into its place. For a short time he sat glowering across the desk. When he did speak it was

irefully.

"Two more," he said. "Flat out."

Registering a thin smile, Lawson suggested, "Why not leave my ship alone and let me see Markhamwit?"

"Get this into your head," retorted Kasine. "If any and every crackpot who chose to land on this planet could walk straight in to see the Great Lord there would have been trouble long ago. The Great Lord would have been assassinated ten times over."

"He must be popular!"

"You are impertinent. You do not appear to realize the peril of your own position." Leaning forward with a grunt of discomfort, Kasine hushed his tones in sheer awe of himself. "Outside that *door* are those empowered merely to ask questions. Here, within this room, it is different. Here, I make decisions."

"Takes you a long time to get to them," said Lawson, unimpressed.

Ignoring it, the other went on, "I can decide whether or not your mouth gives forth facts. If I deem you a liar, I can decide whether or not it is worth turning to less tender means of obtaining the real truth. If I think you too petty to make even your truths worth having, I can decide when, where and how we shall dispose of you." He slowed down by way

of extra emphasis. "All this means that I can order your immediate death."

"The right to blunder isn't much to boast about," Lawson told him.

"I do not think your effective removal would be an error," Kasine countered. "Those creatures in *your* ship are impotent so far as this room is concerned. What is to prevent me from having you destroyed?"

"Nothing."

"Ah!" Slightly surprised by this frank admission, the fat face became gratified. "You *agree* that you are helpless to save yourself?"

"In one way, yes. In another, no." "Meaning?"

"You can have me slaughtered if you wish. It will be a little triumph for you if you like that sort of thing." Lawson's eyes came up, looked levelly at the other's. "It would be wisest

if you enjoyed the triumph to the full and made the very most of it, for it won't last long."

"Won't it?"

"Pleasure is for today. Regrets are for tomorrow. After the feast, the reckoning."

"Oho? And who will present the bill?" "The Solarian Combine."

"There you go again!" Kasine rubbed his forehead wearily. "The Solarian Combine. I am sick and tired of it. Forty times have I faced so-called Solarians all of whom proved to be maniacs escaped or expelled from some not too faraway planet.

But I'll give you your due for one thing: you're the coolest and most collected of the lot.

"I suspect that it is *going* to be rather difficult to bring you to your senses. We may have to concoct an entirely new technique to deal with you."

"Too bad," said Lawson, sympathetically.

"Therefore I—" Kasine broke off as the door opened and a five-comet officer entered in a hurry.

"Message from the Great Lord," announced the newcomer. He shot an uneasy glance at Lawson before he went on. "Regardless of any conclusion to which you may have come, you are to preserve this arrival intact, unharmed."

"That's taking things out of my hands," grumbled Kasine. "Am I not supposed to know the reasons?"

Hesitating a moment, the officer said, "I was not told to keep them from you."

"Then what are they?"

"This example of other-life must be kept in fit condition to talk. Reports have now come in from the defense department and elsewhere. We want to know how his ship slipped through the planetary detector-screen, how it got past the aerial patrols. We want to know why the vessel differs from all known types in the galaxy, where it comes from, what gives it such tremendous velocity. In particular, we must find out the capabilities and military potential of those who built the boat."

Kasine blinked at this recital. Each of these questions, he felt, was fully loaded and liable to go bang. The mind behind his ample features worked overtime. For all his gross bulk he was not without mental agility. And one thing he'd always been good at sniffing was the smell of danger.

Words and phrases whirled through his calculating brain: slipped past, origin, *type* of ship, tremendous velocity, bumble-bees, the coolest and most collected. His brilliant and sunken eyes examined Lawson again. In the light of what the officer had brought he could now see more clearly the feature of this strange biped that inwardly had worried him most. It was a somewhat appalling certitude!

He felt impelled to take a gamble. If it did not come off he had nothing serious to lose.

If it did he would get the credit for great perspicacity.

Very slowly, Kasine said, "I think I can answer those questions in part. This creature claims that he is a Solarian. I consider it remotely possible that he may be!"

"May be! A Solarian!" The officer stuttered a bit, backed toward the door. "The Great Lord must know of this. I will tell him your decision at once."

"It is not a decision," warned Kasine, hastily ensuring himself against future wrath. "It is no more than a modest opinion."

He watched the other go out. Already he was beginning to wonder whether he had adopted the correct tactics or whether there was some other as yet unperceived but safer play.

His gaze turned toward the subject of his thoughts. Lawson said, very comfortingly, "You've just saved your fat neck."

CHAPTER IV

MARKHAMWIT went through the data for the fourth time, pushed the papers aside, walked restlessly up and down the room.

I don't like this incident. I view it with the greatest suspicion. We may be victims

of a Nilean trick."

"That is possible, my lord," endorsed Minister Ganne.

"Let's suppose they've invented an entirely new type of vessel they've reason to think invincible. The obvious step is to test it as conclusively as can be done. They must try it out before they adopt it in large numbers. If it can penetrate our defenses, land here and get out again, it's a success."

"Quite, my lord." Ganne had built his present status on a firm foundation of consistent agreement.

"But it would be a giveaway if it arrived with a Nilean crew aboard," Markhamwit went on, looking sour. "So they hunt for and obtain a non-Nilean life-form as ally. He comes here hiding himself behind a myth." He smacked one pair of hands together, then the other pair. "All this is well within the limits of probability. Yet, as Kasine thinks, the arrival's story may be true."

Ganne doubted it but refrained from saying so. Now and again the million-to-one chance turned up to the confusion of all who had brashly denied its possibility.

"Get me Zigstrom," decided Markhamwit suddenly. When the connection had been made he fitted the earplug, spoke into the thin tube, "Zigstrom, we have many authorities on the Solarian Myth. I have heard it said there are one or two who believe it to have a real basis. Who is the chief of these?"

He listened a bit, growled, "Don't hedge with me. I want his name. He has nothing to fear." A pause followed by, "Alemph? Find him for me. I must have him here without delay."

The required expert turned up in due course, sweaty with haste, dishevelled and ill at ease. He came hesitantly into the room, bowing low at every second step.

"My lord, if Zigstrom has given you the impression that I am a leader of one of these foolish cults, I must assure you that—"

"Don't be so jittery," Markhamwit snapped. "I wish to pick your mind, not deprive you of your bowels." Taking a chair, he rested his four arms on its rests, fixed authoritative eyes upon the other. "You believe that the Solarian Myth is some-thing more than a frontier legend. I want to know why."

"The story has repetitive aspects that are too much for mere coincidence," said Alemph. "And there are other and later items I consider significant."

"I have no more than perfunctory knowledge of the tale," Markhamwit informed. "In my position I've neither time nor inclination to study the folklore of our galaxy's outskirts. Be more explicit. You have been brought here to talk, not to suffer."

Alemph plucked up courage. "At one edge of our galaxy are eight populated solar systems fairly close together and arranged in a semi-circle. They have a total of thirty-nine planets. At what would be the center of their circle lies a ninth system with seven inhabitable planets devoid of any life higher than the animals."

"I am aware of that much," commented Markhamwit. "Carry on."

"The eight populated systems have never developed space travel even to the present day. Yet when we first visited them we found they knew many things about each other impossible to learn by astronomical observation. They had a strange story to account for this knowledge. They said that at some unspecified time in the very far past they'd had repeated visits from the ships of the Elmones, a life-form occupying this ninth and now deserted system. All eight believe that the Elmones

ultimately intended to master them by ruthless use of superior techniques. They were to be subdued and could do nothing effective to prevent it."

"But they weren't," Markhamwit observed.

"No, my lord. It is at this point that the myth really begins. All eight systems tell the same story. That is an important thing to remember. That is what I call too much for coincidence."

"Get on with it," ordered the Great Lord, showing a touch of impatience.

Continuing hurriedly, Alemph said, "Just at this time a strange vessel emerged from the mighty gulf between our galaxy and the next one, made its landing on the Elmones's system as the most highly developed in that area. It carried a crew of two small bipeds. They claimed the seemingly im-possible feat of having crossed the gulf. They called themselves Solarians. "There was only one piece of evidence to support their amazing claim: their vessel had so tremendous a turn of speed that while in flight it could neither be seen nor detected."

"And then?"

"The Elmones were by nature incurably brute± and ambitious. They slaughtered the Solarians and pulled the ship to pieces in an effort to discover its secret. They failed absolutely. Many, many years later a second Solarian vessel plunged out of the enormous void. It came in search of the first and it soon suffered the same fate. Again its secret remained inviolable."

"I can credit that much," said Markhamwit. "Alien techniques are elusive when one cannot even imagine the basis from which they've started. Why, the Nileans have been trying—" He changed his mind about going on, snapped, "Continue with your story."

"It would seem from what occurred later that this second ship had borne some means of sending out a warning signal for, many years afterward, a third and far larger vessel appeared but made no landing. It merely circled each Elmones planet, dropped thousands of messages saying that where death is concerned it is better to give than receive. Maybe it also bathed each planet in an unknown ray, or momentarily embedded it in a force-field such as we cannot conceive, or dropped minute bacteria along with the messages. Nobody knows. The vessel disappeared into the dark chasm whence it came and to the present day the cause of what followed has remained a matter for speculation."

"And what did follow?"

"Nothing immediately. The Elmones made a hundred crude jokes about the messages which soon became known to the other eight systems. The Elmones proceeded with preparations to enslave their neighbors. A year later the blow fell, or it would be better to say began to fall. It dawned upon them that their females were bearing no young. Ten years later they were frantic. In fifty years they were numerically weak and utterly desperate. In one hundred years they had disappeared forever from the scheme of things. The Solarians had killed nobody, injured *nobody*, shed not a single drop of blood. They had contented themselves with denying existence to the unborn. The Elmones had been eliminated with a ruthlessness equal to their own but without their brutality. They have gone. There are now no Elmones in our galaxy or anywhere in Creation."

"A redoubtable tale ready-made for the numerous charlatans who have tried to

exploit it," said Markhamwit. "The credulous are always with us. I am not easily to be taken in by tall tales of long ago. Is this all your evidence?"

"Begging your pardon, my lord," offered Alemph. "There are the seven inhabitable but deserted worlds still in existence. There is precisely the same story told by eight other systems who remained out of touch until we arrived. And, finally, there are these constant rumors."

"What rumors?"

"Of small, biped-operated and quite uncatchable ships oc-casionally visiting the smallest systems and loneliest planets in our galaxy."

"Bah!" Markhamwit made a gesture of derision. "We re-ceive such a report every hundredth day. Our vessels repeated-ly have investigated and found nothing. The lonely and the isolated will concoct any fanciful incident likely to entice com-pany. The Nileans probably invent a few themselves, hoping to draw our ships away from some other locality. Why, we blew apart their battleship *Narsan* when it went to Dhurg to look into a story we'd permitted to reach their stupid ears."

"Perhaps so, my lord." Having gone so far, Alemph was not to be put off. "But permit me to point out that well as we may know our own galaxy, we know nothing of others."

Markhamwit eyed Minister Ganne. "Do you consider it possible for an intergalactic chasm to be crossed?"

"It seems incredible, my lord," said Ganne, more than anxious not to commit himself. "Not being an astronomical expert I am hardly qualified to give an opinion."

"A characteristic ministerial evasion," scoffed Markhamwit. Resorting to his earplug and voice tube again, he asked for Sector Commander Yielm, demanded, "Regardless of the prac-tical aspect, do you think it theoretically possible for anyone to reach us from the next galaxy?" Silence while he listened, then, "Why not?" He listened again, cut off, turned to the others. "That's his reason: nobody lives for ten thousand years."

"How does he know, my lord?" asked Alemph.

Half a dozen guards conducted James Lawson to the august presence. They formed themselves into a stiff, expressionless row outside the door while he went into the room.

His approach from the entrance to the middle of the floor was imperturbable. Nothing in his manner betrayed slightest consciousness that he was very far from home and among a strange kind. Indeed, he mooched in casually as if sent on a minor errand to buy a pound of crackers.

Indicating a chair, Markhamwit spent most of a minute weighing up the visitor, then voiced his scepticism. "So you are a Solarian?"

"I am."

"You come from another galaxy?"

"That is correct."

Markhamwit shot a now-watch-this glance at Minister Ganne before he asked, "Is it not remarkable that you can speak our language?"

"Not when you consider that I was chosen for that very reason," replied Lawson.

"Chosen? By whom?"

"By the Combine, of course."

"For what purpose?" Markhamwit insisted.

"To come here and have a talk with you."

"About what?"

"This war you're having with the Nileans."

"I knew it!" Folding his top arms, Markhamwit looked self-satisfied. "I knew the Nileans would come into this some-where." His chuckle was harsh. "They are amateurish in their schemings. The least they could have done for you was to think up a protective device better than a mere myth."

"I am little interested in protective devices," said Lawson, carelessly. "Theirs or yours."

Markhamwit frowned. "Why not?"

"I am a Solarian."

"Is that so?" He showed his teeth, thin, white and pointed. "In that case our war with Nilca is none of your business." "Agreed. We view it with splendid indifference."

"Then why come to talk about it?"

"Because we object to one of its consequences."

"To which one do you refer?" inquired Markhamwit, no more than mildly curious.

"Both sides are roaming the spaceways in armed vessels and looking for trouble."

"What of it?"

Lawson said, "The spaceways are free. They belong to everyone. No matter what rights a planet or a system may claim for its own earthly territory, the void between worlds is common property."

"Who says so?" demanded Markhamwit, scowling. "We say so."

"Really?" Taken aback by the sheer impudence of it, the Great Lord invited a further display by asking, "And what makes Solarians think they can lay down the law?"

"We have only one reason," Lawson told him. His eyes took on a certain coldness. "We have the power to enforce it."

The other rocked back, glanced at Minister Ganne, found that worthy studiously examining the ceiling.

"The law we have established and intend to maintain," Lawson went on, "is that every space-going vessel shall have the right of unobstructed passage between worlds. What happens after it lands does not concern us unless it happens to be one of our own." He paused a moment, still cold-eyed, added, "Then it does concern us very much."

Markhamwit did not like that. He didn't like it one little bit. It smacked of an open threat and his natural instinct was to react with a counter-threat. But the interview with Alcmph was still fresh in his mind and he could not rid his thoughts of certain phrases that kept running around and around like a dire warning.

"Fifty years later they were weak and despezate. In a hundred years they were gone—forever!"

He found himself wondering whether even now the ship in which this biped had arrived was-ready to broadcast or radiate an invisible, unshieldable power designed to bring about the same result. It was a horrid thought. As a method of coping with

incurably antagonist life-forms it was so perfect because so permanent. It smacked of the appalling technique of Nature herself, who never hesitated to exterminate a biological error.

One tended to think that this biped was talking out of the back of his neck. The tendency was born of hope that it was nothing but a tremendous bluff waiting to be called. One could call it all too easily by removing the bluffer's headpiece and tearing his ship apart.

As the Elmones were said to have done. What Elmones? There were none! Suppose that it was not bluff?

CHAPTER V

MUCH as he hated to admit it even to himself, the situation had unexpectedly shaped up into a tough one. If in fact it was a cunning Nilean subterfuge it was becoming good enough to prove mighty awkward.

A ship had been dumped on this world, the governmental center of a powerful system at war. On the strength of an ancient fable and its pilot's glib tongue it claimed the ability to sterilize the entire planet. Therefore it was in effect either a mock-bomb or a real one. The only way in which to ascertain its real nature was to hammer on its detonator and try to make it explode.

Could he dare?

Playing for time, Markhamwit pointed out, "War is a two-sided affair. Our battleships are not the only ones patrolling in space."

"We know it," Lawson informed. "The Nileans are also being dealt with."

"You mean you've another ship there?"

"Yes." Lawson registered a faint grin. "The Nileans are stuck with the same problem, and doubtless are handicapped by the dark suspicion that it's another of your tricks."

The Great Lord perked up. It gave him malicious satisfaction to think of the enemy in a jam and cursing him for it. Then his mind suddenly perceived a way of at least partially checking the truth of the other's statements. He turned to Ganne.

"That neutral *world* of Vaile still has contact with both sides. Go beam it a call. Ask if the Nileans have a vessel claiming to be of Solarian origin."

Ganne went out. The answer could not be expected before nightfall yet he was back with it in a few moments.

Shaken and nervous, he reported, "The operators say Valle called a short time ago. A similar question was put to us at the request of the Nileans."

"Hah!" Markhamwit found himself being unwillingly pushed toward Alemph's way of looking at the matter. Folk-lore, he decided, might possibly be founded on fact. Indeed, it was more likely to have a positive basis than not. Long-term effects had to have faraway causes.

Then just as he was nearing the conclusion that Solarians actually do exist it struck him with awful force that if this were a crafty stunt pulled by the Nileans they could be depended upon to back up their stooge in every foreseeable manner. The call through Valle could be nothing more than a carefully planned byplay designed to lend verisimilitude to their deception. If so, it meant that he was correct in his first assumption: that the Solarian Myth was rubbish.

These two violently opposed aspects of the matter got him in a quandary. His

irritation mounted because one used to making swift and final decisions cannot bear to squat on the horns of a dilemma. And he was so squatting.

Obviously riled, he growled at Lawson, "The right to un-obstructed passage covers our vessels as much as anyone else's."

"It covers no warship bearing instructions to intercept, question, search or detain any other spaceship it considers suspicious," declared the other. "Violators of the law are not entitled to claim protection of the law."

"Can you tell me how to conduct a war between systems without sending armed ships through space?" asked Mark-hamwit, bitterly sarcastic.

Lawson waved an indifferent hand. "We aren't the least bit interested in that problem. It is your own worry."

"It cannot be done," Markhamwit shouted.

"That's most unfortunate," remarked Lawson, full of false sympathy. "It creates an awful state of no-war."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Is peace funny?"

"War is a serious matter," bawled Markhamwit, striving to retain a grip on his temper. "It cannot be ended with a mere flick of the finger."

"The fact should be borne in mind by those who so non-chalantly start them," advised Lawson, quite unmoved by the Great Lord's ire.

"The Nileans started it."

"They say that you did."

"They are incorrigible liars."

"That's their opinion of you, too."

A menacing expression on his face, Markhamwit said, "Do you believe them?"

"We never believe opinions."

"You are evading my question. Somebody has to be a liar. Who do you think it is?"

"We haven't looked into the root-causes of your dispute. It is not our woe. So without any data to go upon we can only hazard a guess."

"Go ahead and do some hazarding then," Markhamwit invited. He licked expectant lips.

"Probably both sides have little regard for the truth," opined Lawson, undeterred by the other's attitude. "It is the usual setup. When war breaks out the unmitigated liar comes into his own. His heyday lasts for the duration. After that, the victorious liars hang the vanquished ones."

Had this viewpoint been one-sided Markhamwit could have taken it up with suitable fury. A two-sided opinion is disconcerting. It's slippery. One cannot get an effective grip on it.

So he changed his angle of attack by asking, "Let's suppose I reject your law and have you shot forthwith. What happens then?"

"You'll be sorry."

"I have only your word for that."

"If you want proof you know how to get it," Lawson pointed out.

It was an impasse over which the Great Lord brooded with the maximum of disgust. He was realizing for the first time that by great daring one creature could

defy a world of others. It had pregnant possibilities of which he had never previously thought. Some ingenious use could have been made of it, to the great discomfort of the enemy—assuming that the enemy had not thought of it first and were now using it against him.

There was the real crux of the matter, he decided. Somehow, anyhow, he had to find out whether the Nileans had a hand in this affair. If they had they would make every effort to conceal the fact. If they had not they would be only too willing to show him that his troubles were also theirs.

But then again, how deep was their cunning? Was it more than equal to his own perceptive abilities? Might they not be ready and willing to hide the truth behind a smoke screen of pathetically eager cooperation?

If this new ship actually was a secret Nilean production it followed that those who could build one could equally well build two. Also, the unknown allied world that had provided a biped stooge plus some winged, stinging creatures could provide a second set of pseudo-Solarians.

So even now another fake extra-galactic vessel and crew might be grounded on Nilean territory waiting the inspection of his own or some neutral deputation; everything prepared to convince him that fiction is fact and thereby persuade him to recall all warships from the spaceways. That would leave the foe a clear field for long enough to enable them to grasp victory. He and his kind would know that they had been taken for a ride only when it was too late. About the sole crumb of comfort he could find was the thought that if this were not an impudent hoax, if all this Solarianism were genuine and true, then the Nileans themselves were being tormented by exactly the same processes of reasoning. At this very moment they might be viewing with serious misgivings the very outfit that was causing all his bother, wondering whether or not the ship was supporting evidence born of the Great Lord's limitless foresight.

This picture of the Nileans' predicament served to soothe his liver sufficiently to let him ask, "In what way do you expect me to acknowledge this law of yours?"

Lawson said, "By ordering the immediate return of all armed vessels to their planetary bases."

"They'll be a fat lot of use to us just sitting on their home stations."

"I don't agree. They will still be in fighting trim and ready to oppose any attack. We deny nobody the right to defend themselves."

"That's exactly what we're doing right now," declared Mark-hamwit. "Defending ourselves."

"The Nileans say the same."

"I have already told you that they are determined and per-sistent liars."

"I know, I know." Lawson brushed it aside like a subject already worn thin. "So far as we are concerned you can smother every one of your own worlds under an immense load of warships ready to annihilate the first attacker. But if they fight at all it must be in defense of their territory. They must not roam around wherever they please and carry the war some-place else."

"But—"

"Moreover," Lawson went on, "you can have a million ships roaming freely through space if you wish. Their numbers, routes or destinations would be nobody's

business, not even ours. We won't object so long as each and every one of them is a peaceful trader going about its lawful business and in no way interfering with other people's ships."

"You won't object?" echoed Markhamwit, his temper again tried by the other's airy self-confidence. "That is most gracious of you!"

Lawson eyed him coolly. "The strong can afford to be gracious."

"Are you insinuating that we are not strong?"

"Reasonableness is strength. Irrationality is weakness."

Banging a hand on a chair arm, Markhamwit declaimed, "There are many things I may be, but there is one thing I am not: I am not irrational."

"It remains to be seen," said Lawson significantly.

"And it will be seen! I have not become the ruler of a great system by benefit of nothing. My people do not serve under a leader whose sole qualification is imbecility. Given time for thought and the loyal support of those beneath me, I can cope with this situation or any other that may come along."

"I hope so," offered Lawson in pious tones. "For your own sake."

Markhamwit leaned forward, exposed his teeth once more and spoke slowly. "No matter what decision I may come to or what consequences may follow, the skin in danger is not mine. It is yours!" He straightened up, made a motion of dismissal. "I will give my answer in the morning. Until then, do plenty of worrying about yourself."

"A Solarian deeply concerned about his own fate," Lawson informed, his hand on the door, "would he rather like one of your hairs bothered about falling out." Opening the door, he stared hard at the Great Lord and added, "The hair goes and is lost and becomes at one with the dust, but the body remains."

"Meaning—?"

"You're not dealing with me as an individual. You are dealing with my kind."

CHAPTER VI

THE guard alerted and accompanied Lawson to the interrogation center, left him at the precise spot where they had first picked him up. Going through the door, he closed it behind him, thus cutting himself off from their view. In leisurely

manner he ambled past desks where examiners looked up from their eternal piles of forms to watch him uncertainly. He had reached the main exit before anyone saw fit to dispute his progress.

An incoming three-comet officer barred his way and asked, "Where are you going?"

"Back to my ship."

The other showed vague surprise. "You have seen the Great Lord?"

"Of course. I have just left him." Then with a confiding air, "We had a most interesting conversation. He wishes to consult with me again first thing in the morning."

"Does he?" The officer's eyes hugely magnified Lawson's importance. It did not take him a split second to conceive a simple piece of logic: to look after Markhamwit's guest would be to please Markhamwit himself. So with praiseworthy opportunism he said, "I will get a truck and run you back."

"That is very considerate of you," assured Lawson, looking at the three comets as

if they were six.

It lent zip to the other's eagerness. The truck was forth-coming in double-quick time, rolled away before Ganne or Kasine or anyone else could intervene to question the propriety of letting the biped run loose. Its speed was high, its driver inclined to be garrulous.

"The Great Lord is a most exceptional person," he offered, hoping it might be repeated in his favor on the morrow. Privately he thought Markhamwit a pompous stinker. "We are most fortunate to have such a leader in these trying times."

"You could have one worse," agreed Lawson, blandly damning Markhamwit with faint praise.

"I remember once—" The other broke off, brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop, scowled toward the side of the road. In a rasping voice he demanded of the new object of his attention, "Who gave you orders to stand there?"

"Nobody," admitted Yadiz, dolefully.

"Then why are you there?"

"He cannot be somewhere else," remarked Lawson.

The officer blinked, studied the windshield in complete silence for a while, then twisted to face his passenger. "Why can't he?"

"Because wherever he happens to be is there. Obviously he can't be where he isn't." Lawson sought confirmation of Yadiz. "Can you?"

Something snapped, for the other promptly abandoned all further discussion, flung open the truck's door with a resounding crash and snarled at Yadiz, "Get inside, you gaping idiot!"

Yadiz got in, handling his weapon as if it could bite him at both ends. The truck moved forward. For the remainder of the trip its driver hunched over the wheel, chewed steadily at his bottom lip and said not a word. Now and again his eye-brows knotted with the strain of thought as he made vain attempts to sort out the unsortable.

At the guard-ring the paunchy individual who had first consigned the arrival to the interrogation center watched the truck jerk to a stop and the trio get out. He came up frowning.

"So they have let him go?"

"Yes," said the driver, knowing no better.

"Whom did he see?"

"The Great Lord himself."

The other gave a little jump, viewed Lawson with embarrassed respect and took some of the authority out of his tones.

"They didn't say what is to be done about these four casualties we've suffered?"

"Made no mention of them," the driver answered. "Maybe they—"

Lawson chipped in, "I'll tend to them. Where are they?" "Over there," He indicated a dip to his left. "We couldn't shift them pending instructions."

"It wouldn't have mattered. They'd have recovered by this time tomorrow, anyway."

"It isn't fatal then?"

"Not at all," Lawson assured. "I'll go get them a shot of stuff that will bring them to life in two ticks."

He went toward the ship. The driver climbed moodily into his truck and headed back to town.

The creature perched on the rim of the little controlroom's observation-port was the size of Lawson's fist. Long extinct Terran bees would have thought it a giant among their kind. Modern Callistrian ones might have regarded the Terran variety as backward pygmies had there been any real consciousness of Callistrianism or Terranism or any other form of planetary parochialism.

But at this far advanced stage of development of an entire solar system there had ceased to be an acute awareness of worldly origin, shape or species. A once essential datum in the environment had been discarded and no longer entered into the computations of anyone. The biped was not mentally biased by his own bipedal form; the insect not obsessed by its insectual condition. They knew themselves for what they were, namely, Solarians and two aspects of one colossal entity that had a thousand other facets elsewhere.

Indeed, the close-knit relationship between life-forms far apart in shape and size but sharing a titanic oneness in psyche had developed to the point where they could and did hold mental intercourse in a manner not truly telepathic. It was "self-thinking," the natural communion between parts of an enormous whole.

So Lawson had no *difficulty* in conversing with a creature that had no aural sense adequately attuned to the range of his voice, no tongue with which to speak. The communication came easier than any vocal method, was clear and accurate, left no room for linguistic or semantic boobytraps, no need to explain the meaning of meaning.

He flopped into the pilot's seat, gazed meditatively through the port and opined, "I'm not sanguine about them being reasonable."

"It does not matter," commented the other. "The end will be the same."

"True, Buzwuz, but unreasonableness means time and trouble."

"Time is endless; trouble another name for fun," declared Buzwuz, being profound. He employed his hind legs to clean the rear part of his velvet jacket.

Lawson said nothing. His attention shifted to a curiously three-dimensional picture fastened to the side wall. It depicted four bipeds, one of whom was a swart dwarf, also one dog wearing sun-glasses, six huge bees, a hawklike bird, a tusked monster vaguely resembling a prick-eared elephant, something else like a land-crab with long-fingered hands in lieu of claws, three peculiarly shapeless entities whose radiations had fogged part of the sensitive plate, and finally a spider-like creature jauntily adorned with a feathered hat.

This characteristically Solarian bunch was facing the lens in the stiff, formal attitudes favored by a bygone age and so obviously were waiting for the birdie that they were unconsciously comical. He treasured this scene for its element of whimsy, also because there was immense significance in the amusing similarity of pose among creatures so manifestly unconscious of their differences. It was a picture of unity that is

strength; unity born of a handful of planets and a double-handful of satellites circling a common sun.

'Another bee-mind as insidious as part of his own came from somewhere outside the ship, saying, "Want us back yet?" "No hurry."

"We're zooming around far beyond the city," it went on. "We've shown ourselves within reach of a few of them. They swiped at us without hesitation. And they meant it!" A pause, followed by, "They have instinctive fear of the unfamiliar. Reaction-time about one-tenth second. Choice of reaction: that which is swiftest rather than that which is most effective. Grade eight mentalities lacking unity other than that imposed upon them from above."

"I know." Lawson squirmed out of his seat as a heavy hammering sounded on the ship's shell somewhere near the air-lock. "Don't go too far away, though. You may have to come back in a rush."

Going to the lock, he stood in its rim and looked down at a five-comet officer. The caller had an air of irateness tempered by apprehension. His eyes kept surveying the area above his head or straining to see past the biped's legs lest something else spring out to the attack.

"You're not supposed to be here," he informed Lawson. "Aren't I? Why not?"

"Nobody gave you permission to return."

"I don't need permission," Lawson told him.

"You cannot come back without it," the other contradicted. Registering an expression of mock-bafflement, Lawson said, "Then how the deuce did I get here?"

"I don't know. Someone blundered. That's his worry and not mine."

"Well, what *are you* worrying about?" Lawson invited.

"I've just had a message from the city ordering me to check on whether you are actually here because, if so, you shouldn't be. You ought to be at the interrogation center."

"Doing what?"

"Awaiting their final decisions."

"But they aren't going to make any," said Lawson, with devastating positiveness. "It is we who will make the final ones."

The other didn't like the sound of that. He scowled, watched the sky, kept a wary eye on what little he could see of the ship's interior.

"I've been instructed to send you to the city at once." "By whom?"

"Military headquarters."

"Tell them I'm not going before morning."

"You've got to go now," insisted the officer.

"All right. Invite your superiors at headquarters to come and fetch me." -

"They can't do that."

"I'll say they can't!" agreed Lawson, with hearty emphasis. This was even less to the visitor's taste. He said, "If you

won't go voluntarily you'll have to be taken by force." "Try it."

"My troops will receive orders to attack."

"That's all right with me. You go shoo them along. Orders are orders, aren't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"And," Lawson continued firmly, "it's the order-givers and not the order-carry-outers who'll get all the blame, isn't it?" "The blame for what?" inquired the officer, very leerily. "You'll find out!"

The other stewed it a bit. What would be found out, he decided, was anyone's guess, but his own estimate was that it could well be something mighty unpleasant.

The biped's attitude amounted to a guarantee of that much.

"I think I'll get in touch again, tell them you refuse to leave this vessel and ask for further instructions," he decided rather lamely.

"That's the boy," endorsed Lawson, showing hearty approval. "You look after yourself and yourself will look after you."

CHAPTER VII

THE Great Lord Markhamwit paced up and down the room in the restless manner of one burdened by an unsolvable problem. Every now and again he made a vicious slap at his harness, a sure sign that he was considerably exercised in mind and that his liver was feeling the strain.

"Well," he snapped at Minister Ganne, "have you been able to devise a satisfactory way out?"

"No, my lord," admitted Ganne, ruefully.

"Doubtless you retired and enjoyed a good night's sleep without giving it another thought?"

"Indeed, no, I—"

"Never mind the lies. I am well aware that everything is left to me." Going to his desk he employed its plug and tube, asked, "Has the biped started out yet?" Getting a response, he resumed his pacing. "At last he condescends to come and see me. He will be here in half a time-unit."

"He refused to return yesterday," remarked Ganne, treating disobedience as something completely outside all experience. "He viewed all threats with open disdain and practically invited us to attack his ship."

"I know. I know." Markhamwit dismissed it with an irritated wave of the hand. "If he is a bare-faced bluffer it can be said to his credit that he is a perfect one. There is the real source of all the trouble."

"In what way, my lord?"

"Look, we are a powerful life-form, so much so that after we have defeated the Nileans we shall be complete masters of our entire galaxy. Our resources are great, our resourcefulness equally great. We are highly scientific. We have spaceships and formidable weapons of war. To all intents and purposes we have conquered the elements and bent them to our will. That makes us strong, does it not?"

"Yes, my lord, very strong."

"It also makes us weak," growled Markhamwit. "This problem dumped in our laps proves that we are weak in one respect, namely, we have become so conditioned in dealing with concrete things that we don't know how to cope with intangibles. We match rival ships with better ships, enemy guns with bigger guns. But we are stalled immediately a foe abandons all recognized methods of warfare and resorts to what may be no more than a piece of sheer, unparalleled impudence."

"Surely there must be some positive way of checking the truth and—"

"I can think of fifty ways." Markhamwit ceased his trudging and glared at Ganne as if that worthy were personally responsible for the predicament. "And the beauty of them all is that not one is genuinely workable,"

"No, my lord?"

"No! We could check on whether Solarians actually do exist in the next galaxy if our ships could get there, which they can't. And neither can any other ship,

according to Yielm. We could make direct contact with the Nileans, call off the war and arrange mutual action against Solarian interlopers, but if the whole affair is a Nilean trick they will continue to deceive us to our ultimate downfall. Or we could seize this biped, strap him to an operating table and cut the truth out of him with a scalpel."

"That ought to be the best way," ventured Ganne, seeing nothing against it.

"Undoubtedly, if his story is a lot of bluff. But what if it is not?"

"Ah!" said Ganne, feeling for an itch and pinching deep into his hide.

The whole position is fantastic," declared Ivfarkhamwit. "This two-armed creature comes here without any weapons identifiable as such. Not a gun, not a bomb, not a ray-projector. So far as we know there isn't so much as a bow and arrow on his boat. His kind have killed nobody, injured nobody, shed not a drop of blood either now or in our past, yet he claims powers of a kind we hesitate to test."

"Do you suppose that we are already sterilized and therefore doomed, like the Elmones?" Ganne asked, plainly uneasy.

"No, certainly not. If he had done such a thing he would have blasted off during the night because there would be no point in dickering with us any longer."

"Yes, that's true." Ganne felt vastly relieved without knowing why.

Markhamwit continued, "Anyway, he's said nothing whatever about such methods of dealing with us. We know of them only fictionally, as part of the Solarian Myth. The sole threats he has made are that if we destroy him we shall then have to cope with those winged creatures who will remain here to outbreed us, and that if by some means we succeed in destroying them also, we shall still have to face whatever the Combine may bring against us later on. I cannot imagine the true nature of that particular menace except that by our standards it will be unorthodox."

"Their methods may represent the normal ways of warfare in their own galaxy," Ganne pointed out. "Perhaps they never got around to inventing guns and high explosives."

"Or perhaps they discarded them a million years ago in favor of techniques less costly and more effective." Markhamwit cast an impatient glance at the time recorder whirring on the wall. "Trickery or not, I have learned a valuable lesson from this incident. I have learned that tactics are more important than instruments, wits are better than warheads. If we had used our brains a bit more we might have persuaded the Nileans to knock themselves out and save us a lot of

bother. All that was needed was a completely original approach."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne, privately praying that he would not be commanded to suggest one or two original approaches.

"What I want to know," Markhamwit went on, bitterly, "and what I must know is whether the Nileans have thought of it first and are egging us on to knock ourselves out. So when this self-professed Solarian arrives I'm going to—"

He ceased as a knock sounded, the door opened and the captain of the guard showed himself, bowing low.

"My lord, the alien is here."

"Show him in."

Plumping heavily into a chair, Markhamwit tapped restless fingers on four arm rests and glowered at the door.

Entering blithely, Lawson took a scat, smiled at the waiting pair and asked, "Well, does civilization come to these parts or not?"

It riled the Great Lord, but he ignored the question, controlled his temper and said heavily, "Yesterday you returned to your vessel contrary to my wishes."

"Today your warships are still messing around in free space contrary to ours." Lawson heaved a sigh of resignation. "If wishes were fishes we'd never want for food."

"You appear to forget," informed Markhamwit, "that in this part of the cosmos it is my desires that are fulfilled and not yours!"

"But you've just complained about yours being ignored," remarked Lawson, pretending surprise.

Markhamwit licked sharp teeth. "It won't happen again. Certain individuals made the mistake of letting you go un-opposed, without question. They will pay for that. We have a way with fools."

"So have *we!*"

"That is something of which I require proof. You are going to provide it." His voice had an authoritative note. "And what is more, you are going to provide it in the way I direct, to my complete satisfaction."

"How?" inquired Lawson.

"By bringing the Nilcan high command here to discuss this matter face to face."

"*They* won't come."

"I guessed you'd say that. It was such a certainty that I could have said it for you." Markhamwit displayed satisfaction with his own foresight. "They've thought up an impudent bluff. Now they're called upon to support it in person by chancing their precious hides. That is too much. That is taking things too far. So they won't do it." He threw a glance at Minister Ganne. "What did I tell you?"

"I don't see how the Nileans or anyone else can bolster a non-existent trick," offered Lawson, mildly.

"They could appear before me to argue the problem. That would be convincing so far as I'm concerned."

"Precisely!"

Markhamwit frowned. "What d'you mean, precisely?"

"If it's a stunt of their own contriving why shouldn't they back it to the limit and risk a few lives on it? The war is on and they've got to suffer casualties anyway. If they can dig up volunteers for one dangerous mission they can find them for another."

"So?"

"But they won't gamble one life on a setup they suspect to be of your making. There's no percentage in it."

"It is not of my making. You know that."

"The Nileans don't," said Lawson.

"You claim to have another ship on their world. What's it there for if not to persuade them?"

"You're getting your ideas mixed."

"Am I?" Markhamwit's grip was tight on the arms of his chair. He'd almost had

enough of this biped. "In what way?"

"The vessel is there solely to tell the Nileans to cease cluttering the space lanes—or else! We're not interested in your meetings, discussions or wars. You can kiss and he friends or fight to the death and it makes not the slightest difference to us one way or the other. All that we're concerned about is that space remains free, preferably by negotiation and mutual agreement. If not, by compulsion."

"Compulsion?" snapped Markhamwit. "I would give a great deal to learn exactly how much power your kind really does possess. Perhaps little more than iron nerves and wagging tongues."

"Perhaps," admitted Lawson, irritatingly indifferent.

"I'll tell you something you don't know," Markhamwit leaned forward, staring at him. "Our first, second, third and fourth battle fleets have dispersed. Temporarily I've taken them out of the war. It's a risk, but worth it."

"Doesn't alter the situation if they're still chasing around here, there and everywhere."

"On the contrary it may alter the situation very considerably if we have a fair measure of luck," contradicted Markhamwit, watching him closely. "They have been redirected into a colossal hunt. I now have a total of seventeen thousand vessels scouting all cosmic sectors recently settled or explored by Nileans. Know what they are looking for?"

"I can guess."

"They're seeking a minor, unimportant, previously unnoticed planet populated by pink-skinned bipeds with hard faces and gabby mouths. If they find it"—he swept an arm in a wide, expressive arc—"we'll blow them clean out of existence and the Solarian Myth along with them."

"How nice."

"We shall also deal with you in suitable manner. And we'll settle with the Nileans once and for all."

"Dear me," offered Lawson, meditatively. "Do you really expect us to sit around forever while you play hunt the slipper?"

For the umpteenth time thwarted by the other's appalling nonchalance, Markhamwit lay back without replying. For a wild moment he toyed with the notion that perhaps the Nileans were infinitely more ingenious than he'd first supposed and were taking him for a sucker by manning their ship with remotely controlled robots. That would account for this biped's unnatural impassivity. If he were nothing more than the terminal instrument of some highly complicated array of electronic apparatus operated by Nilean science from afar, it would account for his attitude. A talking-machine has no emotions.

But it just wasn't possible. Months ago, before the war started, a radio-beamed message to the nearest fringe of Nilean's petty empire had to be relayed from planet to planet, system to system, took a long time to get there, an equally long time for a reply to come back. It was completely beyond the power of any science, real or imaginary, so to control an automaton across many light years that it could respond conversationally with no time lag whatsoever.

Lawson, he decided uneasily, was robotic in some ways but definitely not a robot. Rather was he a life-form possessed of real individuality plus a queer something else

impossible to describe. A creature to whom an unknown quantity or quality has been added and therefore unlike anything formerly encountered.

Emerging from his meditations, he growled, "You'll sit around because you'll have no choice about the matter. I have ordered that you be detained pending my further decisions."

"That doesn't answer my question," Lawson pointed out.

"Why doesn't it?"

"I asked whether you expect *us* to sit around. What you see fit to do with this portion can have no effect upon the re-mainder."

"This portion," echoed Markhamwit, his air that of one not sure whether he has heard aright. "I have got *all* of you!" He pressed a stud on his desk.

Lawson stood up as the guards came in, smiled thinly and said, "I can tell you a fable of the future. There was once an idiot who picked a grain of sand from a mountain, cupped it in the palm of his hand and said, 'Look, I am holding a mountain!' "

"Take him away," bawled Markhamwit at the escort. "Keep him behind bars. until I want him again."

Watching them file out, and the door close, he fumed a bit. "Creating cockeyed problems for others is a game at which two can play. In this existence one has to use one's wits."

"Undoubtedly, my lord," indorsed Minister Ganne, duti-fully admiring him.

CHAPTER VIII

JAMES LAWSON carefully surveyed his cell. Large and fairly comfortable, with a queer-shaped bed, a thick, straw-stuffed mattress, the inevitable four-armed chair, a long, narrow ta-ble. A generous basket of fruit stood on the middle of the latter, also some brownish objects resembling wholemeal cakes.

He was as amused by the sight of the food as he had been by the rough courtesy with which the guard had conducted him here. Evidently Markhamwit had been specific in his in-structions. Put him in the jug. Don't harm him, don't starve him, but put him in the jug.

Markhamwit wanted it both coming and going. The Great Lord was establishing a claim to kindness as a form of in-surance against whatever might befall while, at the same time, keeping the victim just where he wanted him until thoroughly satisfied that nothing dreadful could or would befall.

There was a small barred window twenty feet up, more for ventilation than for light. The only other opening was the big grille across the entrance. A guard sat on a stool the other side of the bars boredly reading a narrow but thick cylindrical scroll which he unwound slowly as his gaze followed the print down.

Tilting back in the chair and resting his heels on the end rim of the bed, Lawson had a look at his ship. This was fully as easy as staring at the blank walls of the cell. All that was necessary was to readjust his mind and look through other eyes elsewhere. It can be done, indeed it becomes second na-ture when the mind behind the other eyes is to all intents and purposes a part of one's own.

He got a multiple picture because he was looking through multiple lenses, but he was accustomed to that. Meeting and knowing other shapes and forms is as nothing compared with the experience of actually sharing them, even those employ-ing

organs stranger than eyes.

The ship was resting exactly as he'd left it. Its lock still stood wide open but nobody was entering or attempting to do so. The guards maintained their ring, watched the vessel in the perfunctory manner of those already sick of the sight of it.

As he studied the scene the swiftly moving eyes swung low, dived toward an officer who loomed enormously with sheer closeness. The officer made a wild swipe at the eyes with a short sword curved two ways like a double sickle. Involuntarily Lawson blinked, for it came like a slash at his own head. His neck went taut as the shining blade whistled through the space occupied by his gullet had he been there in person.

"Someday, Lou," he thought, "I'll do as much for you. I'll give you a horrible nightmare."

The bee-mind came back. "Ever looked through somebody landbound, trying to escape danger on legs and without wings? That is a nightmare!" A pause as what could be seen through his optics showed him to be zooming skyward. "Want out yet?"

"No hurry," Lawson answered.

Withdrawing from that individual he re-angled his mind and let it reach outward, tremendously outward. This, too, was relatively easy. The velocity of light is sluggish, creeping when compared with near-instantaneous contact between mental components of a psychic whole. Thought is energy, light is energy, matter is energy, but the greatest of these is thought.

Some day his enormously advanced multikind might prove a thesis long evolved: that energy, light and matter are creations of super-thought. They were getting mightily near to it already: just one or perhaps two more steps to godhood when they'd have finally established the mastery of mind over matter by using the former to create the latter according to their needs.

So there was no time lag in his reaching for the central world of Nilea, nor would there have been one of any handi-capping duration had he reached across the galaxy and over the gulf into the next. He merely thought "at" his objective and was there, seeing through eyes exactly like his own at the interior of a ship exactly like his own except in one respect: it harbored no big bees.

This other vessel's crew consisted of one biped named Edward Reeder and four of those fuzzy, shapeless entities who had fogged his souvenir picture. A quartet of Rheans, these, from a moon of the ringed planet. Rheans in name only; Solarians in long-established fact.

Callistrian bees wouldn't be of much avail in coping with Nileans who were likely to hang around inviting hearty stings for the sheer pleasure of resulting intoxication. Their peculiar make-up enabled them to get roaring Brunk on any acid other than hydrofluoric, and even that corrosive stuff was viewed as a liquid substitute for scoot berries.

But the Nileans were south-eyed, scanning a band of the spectrum that ran well into the ultra violet. And one has to be decidedly north-eyed to see a Rhean with real clarity. So far as local life-forms were concerned this Solarian vessel was crewed by one impertinent biped and several near-ghosts. Like most creatures suffering optical limitations, the Nileans suspected, disliked—aye, feared—living things never more

than half visible.

It might have been the same with other Solarians in their attitude toward peculiar fellows from a moon of the ringed planet but for one thing: that which cannot be examined visually can be appreciated and understood mentally. The collective Rhean mind was as much intimate part of the greater Solarian mass-mentality as was any other part. They bipeds and the bees had phantom brothers.

Reeder was thinking "at" him, "I've just returned from the third successive interview with their War Board, which is bossed by a hairy bully named Glastrom. He's completely ob-

sesed by the notion that your Markhamwit is trying to out-smart him."

"Similar reaction at this end. I've been stuck in clink while Markhamwit waits for destiny to intervene in his favor."

"They've come near trying the same tactic with me," in-formed Recder's mind, showing strange disinterest in whether or not the other was being made to suffer during his incarceration. "Chief item that has made them hesitate is the problem of what do about the rest of us." His gaze shifted a moment to the shadowy, shapeless quartet posing nearby. "The boys put over a mild demonstration of what can be done by wraiths with the fidgets. They switched off the city's light and power and so forth while crosseyed guards fired at the minor moon. The Nileans didn't like it."

"Can't say they're overfond of our crowd here, either." Lawson paused thoughtfully, went on, "Chronic distrust on both sides is preventing conformity with our demands and seems likely to go on doing so until the crack of doom. Markhamwit is in a mental jam and his only solution is to play for time."

"Same way with Glastrom and the War Board."

"Limit their time," interjected four laconic but penetrating thought-forms from the shapeless ones.

"Limit their time," simultaneously endorsed several bee-minds from a source much nearer.

"Give them one time-unit," confirmed a small and varied number of entities scattered through the galaxy.

"Give them one time-unit," decided an enormous composite mentality far across the gulf.

"Better warn them right away." Recder's eyes showed him to be making for the open lock. His mind held no thought of personal peril that might arise from this ultimatum. He was as ageless as that of which he was part, and as deathless because, whether whole or destroyed, he was part of that which can never die. Like Lawson, he was man plus men plus other creatures. The first might disappear into eternal nothingness, but the plus-quantities remained for ever and ever and ever.

For the same reasons Lawson followed the same course in much the same way. The intangible thread of his thought-stream snapped back from faraway places and the eyes he now looked through were entirely his own. Taking his heels off the bed, he stood up, yawned, stretched himself, went to the grille.

"I've got to speak to Markhamwit at once."

Putting down the scroll, the guard registered the disillusioned expression of one who hopes everlastingly for peace and invariably hopes in vain.

"The Great Lord will send for you in due course," he in-formed. "Meanwhile you

could rest and have a sleep." "I do not sleep."

"Everybody sleeps sometimes or other," asserted the guard, unconsciously dogmatic. "They have to."

"Speak for yourself," advised Lawson. "I've never slept in my life and don't intend to start now."

"Even the Great Lord sleeps," mentioned the guard with the air of one producing incontrovertible evidence.

"You're telling me?" Lawson inquired.

The other gaped at him, sniffed around as if seeking the odor of a dimly suspected insult. "My orders are to keep watch upon you until the Great Lord wishes to see you again."

"Well, then, ask him if he so wishes."

"I dare not."

"All right, ask someone who does dare."

"I'll call the captain of the guard," decided the other with sudden alacrity.

He went along the passage, came back in short time with a larger and surlier specimen who glowered at the prisoner and demanded, "Now, what's all this rubbish?"

Eyeing him with exaggerated incredulity, Lawson said, "Do you really dare to define the Great Lord's personal affairs as rubbish?"

The captain's pomposity promptly hissed out of him like gas from a pricked balloon. He appeared to shrink in size and went two shades paler in the face. The guard edged away from him like one fearful of being contaminated by open sedition.

"I *did* not mean it that way."

"I sincerely hope not," declared Lawson, displaying impressive piety.

Recovering with an effort, the captain asked, "About what do you want to speak to the Great Lord?"

"I'll tell you after you've shown me your certificate." "Certificate?" The captain was mystified. "Which certifi-cate?"

"The document proving that you have been appointed the censor of the Great Lord's conversations."

The captain said hurriedly, "I will go and consult the garri-son commander."

He went away with the pained expression of one who has put his foot in it and must find somewhere to scrape it off. The guard resumed his seat on the stool, mooned at Lawson, killed a cootie.

"I'll give him a hundred milliparts," Lawson remarked. "If he's not back by then, I'm coming out."

The guard stood up, hand on gun, face showing alarm. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You are locked in."

"Hall!" said Lawson as if enjoying a secret joke.

"Besides, I am here."

"That's unfortunate for you," Lawson sympathized. "Either you'll shoot me or you won't. If you don't, I'll walk away and Markhamwit will be most annoyed. If you do, I'll be dead and he'll be infuriated." He shook his head slowly. "Tsk-tsk! I would not care to be you!"

His alarm mounting to a near-unbearable point, the guard tried to watch the grille and the end of the passage at the same time. His relief was intense when the captain reappeared and ordered him to unlock.

The officer said to Lawson, "The commander passed on your request. You will be permitted to talk over the line to Minister Ganne. The rest is up to him."

Leading the way, with the guard in the rear, he conducted the prisoner to a small office, signed to a plug and tube. Taking them up, Lawson held the plug to his ear, it being too big to fit in the locally accepted manner. At the same time his mind sent out a soundless call shipwards.

"This is as good a time as any."

Then he listened to the plug and heard Ganne saying, "What you want to tell the Great Lord can be told to me."

"Pass him the news that he's got seven-eighths of a time-unit," Lawson suggested. "They've wasted the other eighth at this end."

Out one corner of his eye he noted the listening captain registering surly displeasure. His gaze lifted, observed that the door and two windows were half open. Lou, Buzwuz and the others would have no trouble, no trouble at all.

"He's got seven-eighths of a time-unit?" echoed Ganne, his voice rising a fraction. "To do what?"

"Beam his orders for recall."

"Recall?"

Lawson said with tired patience, "You're only wasting valuable moments repeating the end of each sentence. You know what I meant. You were there all the time, listening to our talk. You're not hard of hearing, are you?"

Ganne snapped, "I'll stand for no gross impertinence from you. I want to know precisely what you mean by saying that the Great Lord has seven-eighths of a time-unit."

"It's more like thirteen-sixteenths now. He has got to take action by then."

"Has he?" sneered Ganne. "Well, suppose he doesn't?" "We'll take it."

"That comes well from you. You're in no—" His voice broke off as another one sounded authoritatively in the background. More dimly he could be heard saying, "Yes, my lord. It's the biped, my lord."

Behind him in the little office Lawson could also hear something else: a low drone coming nearer, nearer, through the door, through the window. There were exclamations from the other pair, a few scuffling, jumping noises, two thin yelps, two dull thumps and silence.

Markhamwit came on the line, spoke in harsh tones. "If you hope to precipitate the issue by further bluff, you are very much mistaken." Then with added menace, "Reports from my fleets have now started to come in. Sooner or later I'll get the one for which I am waiting. I shall then deal with you rather drastically."

"You've now got approximately three-quarters of a time-unit," Lawson gave back. "At the end of that period we shall take the initiative, do whatever we consider to be for the best. It won't be drastic because we shed no blood, take no lives. All the same, it will be quite effective."

"Will it?" Markhamwit emitted sardonic chuckles. "In that case I will do part of that which you require of me. In other words, I will institute action at the exact

moment you have nominated. But it will be the action I deem best fitted to the circumstances."

"Time's 'marching on,'" remarked Lawson. The drone had left the room but could still be heard faintly from somewhere outside. He could see the soles of a pair of recumbent jack-boots lying near his own feet.

"You cannot get to your ship, neither can you communi-cate with it," Markhamwit went on, highly pleased with the situation. "And in precisely three-quarters of a time-unit there will be no ship to which you can return. The aerial patrol will have blasted it clean out of existence while it sits there, a steady target that cannot be missed."

"Can't it?"

"The sterilizing apparatus, if there is one, will be vaporized with it before it can be brought into action. Any winged things left flying around will be wiped out one by one as and when opportunity occurs. Since you've seen fit to push this matter to a sudden conclusion I am prepared to take a chance on any-thing the Solarian Combine may do." Finally, with sarcasm, "If there is a Solarian Combine and *if* it can do anything worth a moment's worry."

He must have flung down the plug and tube at his end, for his voice went less distinct as he said to Ganne, "Get Yielm for me. I'm going to show those Nileans that hoodwinking is a poor substitute for bombs and bullets."

Dumping his own end of the line, Lawson turned, stepped over two bodies unable to do more than curse him with their eyes. Going outside, he found himself in a large yard.

He crossed this diagonally under the direct gaze of half a dozen guards patrolling the wall top. Curiosity was their only reason for watching him, the interesting spectacle of a life-form not listed among the many with which they were fa-miliar. It was his manifest confidence that fooled them, his unmistakable air of having every right to be going wherever he was going. Nobody thought to question it, not a momentary notion of escape crossed their minds.

Indeed, one of them obliged by operating the lever that opened the end gate, and lived to damn the day when he per-mitted himself to be misled by appearances. Not to be out-done, another whistled a passing truck which stopped for the fugitive. And the driver, too, found later reason to deplore the pick-up.

Lawson said to the driver, "Can you take me to that ship on the plain?"

"I'm not going that far."

"It's a matter of major importance. I've just been speaking to Minister Ganne about it."

"Oh, what did he say?"

"He put me on to the Great Lord who told me I've got little more than half a time-unit to spare."

"The Great Lord," breathed the other, with becoming rev-erence. He revved up, sent the truck racing onward. "I'll get you there in plenty of time."

There was no need to burst through the guard-ring; it no longer existed. Troops had been withdrawn to a safe distance, assembled in a solid bunch, and were leaning on their armslike an audience awaiting a rare spectacle. A couple of officers danced and gestured as the truck swept alongside the ship, but they were far off, well

beyond calling distance, and the driver failed to notice them.

"Thanks!" Lawson tumbled out of the cab. "One good turn deserves another, so I'm telling you to get out faster than you came."

The other blinked at him. "Why?"

"Because in about one-fifth of a time-unit a dollop of bombs will land right here. You'll make it with plenty to spare provided you don't sit there gaping."

Though puzzled and incredulous, the driver saw clearly that this was a poor time to probe further into the matter. Taking the offered advice, he got out fast, his vehicle rocking with sheer speed.

Lawson entered the lock, closed it behind him. He did not bother to inquire whether all his crew were aboard. He knew that they were there in the same way that they had known of his impending return and intended take-off.

Dumping himself into the pilot's seat he fingered the controls, eyed the ship's chronometer thoughtfully. He'd got just seventy-two milliparts in which to beat the big hang. So he shifted a tiny lever one notch and went out from under.

The vacuum created by the vessel's departure sucked most of the troops' hats from their heads. High above, the aerial patrol swooped and swirled, held on to its missiles and sought in vain for the target.

CHAPTER IX

THE world was a wanderer, a planet torn loose from its parent sun by some catastrophe far back in the tremendous past. At an equally distant time in the future it would be captured by some other star and either join the new family or be destroyed. Meanwhile it curved aimlessly through space, orphan of a bygone storm.

It wasn't cold, it wasn't dark. Internal fires kept it warm. Eternal stars limned it in pale, ethereal light. It had tiny, pastel-shaded flowers and thin, delicate trees that pushed their feet toward the warmth and kept their faces to the stars. It also held sentient life, though not of its own creation.

There were fourteen ships on this uncharted sphere. Eleven were Solarian. One was Nilean. Two belonged to the Great Lord Markhamwit. The Solarian vessels were grouped together in a gentle valley in one hemisphere. The remainder were on the opposite side of the planet, the Nileans separated from their foes by a couple of hundred miles, each combatant unaware of the other's existence.

The situation of these last two groups was a curious one. Each of their three ships had detected the gypsy-sphere at times a few days apart and landed upon it in the hope of discovering bipeds or, at least, gaining some clue to their whereabouts. Each crew had promptly suffered an attack of mental aberration verging upon craziness, exploded the armory, wrecked the vessel and thus marooned themselves. Each crew now sat around stupified by their own idiocy and thoroughly convinced that not another spaceship existed within a billion miles.

The secret of this state of affairs reposed with two of the eleven Solarian vessels. These had on board a number of homarachnids, spiderish quasi-humans from a place unknown to the galaxy, a hot, moist world called Venus. It happened that this world circled around an equally unknown sun called Sol. Which meant that the homarachnids were Solarians along with the bipeds and bees and semivisible fuzzies.

From the purely military viewpoint there was nothing redoubtable about homarachnids. They were unsoldierly, knew nothing of weapons and cared nothing

either. They were singularly lacking in technical skills, viewed even a screwdriver as a cumbersome, patience-straining device. Outwardly, their most noticeable feature was an incurable penchant for wearing the most incongruous feathered hats that the milliners of Venus could devise. In some respects they were the most child-like of the Solarian medley. In one way they were the most deeply to be feared, for they had refractive minds.

With the absolute ease of those to whom it comes naturally any homarachnid could concentrate the great Solarian mass-mentality, projecting it and focusing it where required. The burning point of an immense magnifying glass was as nothing to the effect caused when a non-Solarian mind became the focal point of an attentive homarachnid's brain. The result was temporary but absolute mental mastery.

It *had* to be temporary. The Solarian ethic denied the right to bring any mind into permanent subjection, for that would amount to slavery of the soul. But for this, any pair of homarachnids could have compelled antagonistic warlords to

"see reason" in a mere couple of milliparts. But mentally imposed agreement is worth nothing if it disappears the moment the cause is removed. The final aim must be to persuade Markhamwit and Glastrom to cooperate from motives of expediency and for keeps. The same ethic insisted that this goal be reached without spilling of life fluids if possible, or else at cost of blood only to the high and mighty.

Nobody knew better than Solarians that wars are not caused, declared or willingly fought by nations, planetary peoples or shape-groups, for these consist in the main of plain, ordinary folk who crave nothing more than to be left alone. The real culprits are power-drunken cliques of near-maniacs who by dint of one means or another have coerced the rest. These were the ones to provide the blood if any was going to be shed at all.

Lawson and Reeder and the rest knew the operations of the Solarian mass-mind as well as they knew their own, for it was composed in part of their own. They were sharers in an intellectual common property. Therefore no issuing of detailed orders was necessary to get them to do whatever might be needed. Decisions reached them in ideptically the same form as if thought out by their independent selves.

As others had found to their cost and would do so again and again, the Solarians had an immense advantage in being able to give highly organized battle without benefit of complicated signalling and communications systems. So far as Solarians were concerned, lack of such antiquated technical adjuncts was lack of something susceptible to error, something to go wrong. There would be no mistaken charge of a light brigade in their history.

Lawson's ship was one of the assembled eleven. Reeder's was another. Seven more had come in from lonelier parts of the galaxy for the same purpose: to rendezvous with the re-remaining two' and add a few homarachnids to their crews. Had the enemy been of different nature they might have been reinforced by a different shape, perhaps, elephantine creatures from Europa or dark dwarfs from Mars. The physical instruments were chosen to suit the particular task, and the hat-models of Venus would do fine for this one.

Two of them, gray-skinned and bristly-haired of body, six-legged and with compound eyes, scuttled aboard Lawson's vessel, sniffed suspiciously through organs that were not noses, looked at one another.

"I smell bugs," announced the one adorned with a purple toque around which a fluffy plume was tastefully coiled.

"This can needs delousing," agreed the other who wore a glaring red fez with a long, thin crimson ribbon protruding vertically from its top.

"If you prefer," offered Lawson, "you can go on Reeder's boat."

"What, with that gang of spooks?" He cocked the toque sidewise. "I'd sooner suffer the bugs."

"Me too," agreed Red Fez.

"That is most sociable of you," sneered the mind-form of Buzwuz, chipping in suddenly. He zoomed out of the navigation-room and into the passage, an orange ball on flashing wings. "I think we can manage to—" He broke off as he caught sight of the arrivals, let out a mental screech of agony, whirled round in circles. "Oh, look at them! Just *look!*"

"What's the matter?" aggressively demanded he in the purple toque whose name this year was Nfam. Next year it would be Nfim. And the year after, Nfom.

"The vile headgear," complained Buzwuz, shuddering visibly. "Especially that red thing."

The owner of the fez, whose current name was Jlath, waxed indignant. "I'd have you know this is an original creation by the famous Oroni and—"

Frowning at all and sundry, Lawson interrupted, "When you mutual monstrosities have finished swapping compliments maybe you'll make ready for take-off. The fact that we're inertialess doesn't mean you can clutter up the passage." He slammed the door of the lock, fastened it, went to the pilot's cabin and moved the little lever.

That left ten ships. Reeder's departed soon afterward. Then, the others, one by one. And that left nothing but three ruined cylinders and three ruminative crews unable to do anything but mourn their own inexplicable madness.

CHAPTER X

FIRST contact was one of the Great Lord's heavy battle cruisers, a long, black cylinder well-armed with large caliber guns and remotely controlled torpedoes. It was *heading* at fast pace for Kalambar, a blue-white sun with a small system of planets located on the rim of what the Nileans regarded

as their sphere of interest. Those aboard it had in mind that the Kalambar group was believed to be habitable but little else was known about it; therefore it was a likely hiding-place of Nilean-allies, two-legged or winged.

Lawson knew of this cruiser's existence and intent long before it loomed large enough to obscure a noticeable portion of the starfield and even before sensitive detectors started clicking to mark the presence of something metallic, swift-moving and emitting heat. He knew of it simply because the exotically-hatted pair probed forth as twin channels of a far-away supermind, had no difficulty in picking up the foe's group-thoughts or determining the direction, course and distance of the source. All he had to do was take the ship where they indicated, knowing in precise detail what he'd find when he got there.

Even at the tremendous velocities commonplace only to another galaxy the catching-up took time. But they made it in due course, burst out of the starfield with such suddenness that they were bulleting at equal pace and on parallel course before the other's alarm system had time to give warning.

By the time the bells did set up their clamor it was too late. With remarkable unanimity the crew had conceived several strange notions and were unable to sense the strangeness simply because all were thinking alike. Firstly, the alarm was about to sound and that must be the signal for action. Secondly, it was sheer waste of precious lifetime to mess around in empty space when one could put in some real existence on good, solid earth. Thirdly, there was a suitable haven shining through the dark four points to starboard and much nearer than Kalambar. Fourthly, to place the ship completely out of action on landing would be the most certain way of ensuring a long period of rest and relaxation.

These ideas ran contrary to their military conditioning, were directly opposed to duty and discipline, but they accorded with inward, instincts, secret desires, and moreover were imposed with suggestive power too great to resist.

So the alarm system duly operated and the battle cruiser at once turned four points to starboard. With the Solarian boat following unheeded it sped straight for the adjacent system, made its landing on a world owned by backward, neutral and embarrassed Dirkins who were greatly relieved when a loud bang marked the vessel's disabling and its crew proceeded to lounge around like beachcombers. Only thing the Dirkins could not understand was why this party of intended lotus

eaters suddenly became afflicted with vain regrets coincidentally with the disappearance of that second ship from the sky.

In short order twenty-seven more vessels went the same way, turning off route, dumping themselves on the nearest habitable sphere and sabotaging themselves clean out of the war. Seventeen of these belonged to the Great Lord Mark-harnwit; ten to the Nileans. Not one resisted. Not one fired a gun, launched a torpedo or so much as took evasive action. The partway products of science are pitifully ineffectual when suddenly confronted with the superb end-product, namely, superiority of the brain over all material things.

Nevertheless, ancient ingenuity did try to strike a telling blow at the ultramodern when Lawson came across ship number twenty-nine. The manner in which this one was discovered told in advance of something abnormal about it. The detectors reported it while Jlath and Nfam were mentally feeling through the dark and getting no evidence of anything so near. The reason: the homarachnids were seeking enemy thought-forms and this ship held no thoughts, not one.

Orbiting around a lesser moon, the mystery vessel's design and markings showed it to be an auxiliary warship or armed freighter of Nilean origin. An old and battered rocket-job long overdue for scrapping, it appeared to have been pressed into further service for the duration of the war. It had a medium gun in its bow, fixed torpedo tubes to port and starboard and could aim its missiles only by laboriously positioning itself with respect to the target. A sorry object fit for nothing but escort duty on short runs in a quiet sector, it seemed hardly worth the bother of putting down to ground.

But Lawson and his crew were curious about it. An old but quite intact spaceship totally devoid of evidence of thinking mentalities was somewhat of a phenomenon. It could mean several unusual things all equally worth discovering. No matter how extremely remote the likelihood of anyone developing a screen that homarachnids could not penetrate in search of mind-forms lurking behind, the theoretical possibility

could not be ruled out. Nothing is finally and completely impossible.

Alternately there was the million to one chance that the vessel was crewed by a nonthinking, purely reactive and robot-ic life-form allied to the Nileans. Or, more plausibly, that one of Markhamwit's warships was employing a new weapon capable of slaughtering crews without so much as scratching their vessels, and this particular vessel was a victim. Or, lastly and likeliest, that it had been abandoned and left crewless but carefully parked in a balanced orbit for some reason known only to the deserters.

As the Solarian boat swooped toward the point marked by its detectors, Nfam and JIath strode hurriedly to probe the nearby moon for any minds holding the secret of the silent objective. There wasn't time. They whirled high above the target, automatically recorded its nature, type and markings, and in the next breath had been carried leagues beyond it. The Solarian ship commenced to turn into a wide curve that would bring it back for another once-over. They did not get a second look.

Designed to cope with objects moving considerably slower, the instruments aboard the silent freighter registered the presence of another vessel just a little too late. In less than a milli-part, vacuum tubes flashed, relays snapped over and the freighter exploded. It was vivid and violent blast guaranteed to disable and possibly destroy any battleship that came within snooping distance. It failed in its intent solely because the prospective recipient of the thump already was far out-pacing the flying fragments, of which there were plenty.

"Booby trap," said Lawson. "We'd have been handed a beautiful wallop if our maximum velocity was down to the crawl that local types regard as conventional."

"Yes," responded a bee-mind from somewhere nearer the tail. "And did those two mad hatters warn you of it? Did you hear them screaming, 'Don't go near! Oh, please don't go near!' and feel them pawing at your arm?"

"It seems to me," remarked Nfam to JIath, "that I detect the sharp, grating voice of jealousy, the bitter whine of a lesser life-form incapable of and unsuitable for self-adornment."

"We don't need it," retorted the critic back. "We don't have to return to artificial devices as a means of lending false color to pale, insipid personalities. We have—"

"No hands," put in Nfam, with great dexterity.

"And they fight with their rear ends," added JIath for good measure.

"Now see here, Frog-food, we—"

"Shut up!" roared Lawson with sudden violence.

They went silent. The ship bulleted onward in search of target number thirty.

The next encounter provided an orgy that served to illustrate the superiority of mass-mind efficiency as compared with artificial methods of communication and coordination. Far off across the wheel of light that formed a galaxy a Solarian named Ellis pursued a multitude of bellicose thought-forms traced by his homarachnids and discovered two fleets assembling for battle. The news flashed out to all and sundry even as he snatched a super-dreadnaught lumbering toward the scene and planted it where it would stay put.

Lawson immediately altered course, boosted his vessel to detector-defeating velocity. There was a long way to go according to this galaxy's estimates of

distances but a relative jaunt from the Solarian viewpoint. Unseen and unsuspected, the vessel scudded over a host of worlds, most of them uninhabitable, sterile, deserted.

At one point Nfam's questioning mind found a convoy of ten ships huddled together and heading for the system of a binary, determined them to be neutral traders hoping to make port, without interference by one or the other belligerents. Farther on, nearer the twin suns, a pair of Markhamwit's light destroyers hung in space ready to halt and search the convoy for whatever they saw fit to declare illegal transport of strategic war materials. The Solarian vessel promptly cut its speed, herded these two wolves into a suitable cage, raced onward. The convoy continued to *plug* along innocent of the obstruction so arbitrarily removed from its path.

By the time Lawson got there the scene of intended conflict already had lost some of its orderliness and was dissolving toward eventual chaos. A Nilean force of many hundreds had disposed itself in a huge hemisphere protecting a close-packed group of seven solar systems that were not worth a hoot. Markhamwit's fleet commanders accordingly reasoned that such strength would be marshaled only to defend a sector vital to the enemy's war economy and that therefore these seven systems must be captured and scoured *regardless* of cost. Which was what the Nileans wanted them to think, for, being slightly the weaker party, they knew the value of diverting attention from genuinely critical points by offering the foe a glittering but valueless prize elsewhere. So both sides beamed frantic orders to and fro, strove to get ready to rend the heavens for the sake of what neither could use. The trouble was that preparations refused to work out as they should have done according to the book.

Established tactics of space warfare seemed to be becoming disestablished. Orthodox methods of squaring up to the enemy were not producing orthodox results. The recognized moves of placing light forces here and heavy ones there, a spearhead thus and a defensive screen so, a powerful reserve in that place and a follow-up force in this place, were making a fine mess of the whole issue. Bewilderment among commanders on both sides resembled that of an expert who finds that a certain experiment produces the same results nine hundred ninety-nine times but not the thousandth.

Introduction of a new and yet unidentified factor was the cause of all this. The time lag in their communications beam systems, with coded messages flashed from repeater station to repeater station, was so great that none in this sector knew what had happened to the impudent visitors on their home worlds or that Solarians had turned from argument to action. True, some ships were overdue in this area and presumed lost, but that was inevitable. Losses must be expected in time of war and there was nothing to be gained by investigating the fate of the missing or by trying to ascertain the cause of their disappearance.

So deeply embedded were these notions that for quite a time both sides remained blindly unawares of what was happening right under their noses. And the emotions of opposing commanders remained those of extreme irritation rather than real alarm. Inside their military minds conditioning, masqueraded as logic *and* stated that a fight was trying to get going, that any fight is between two parties with nobody else present except maybe one or two mere lookers-on. Such pseudo-reasoning automatically prevented swift realization of intervention by a third party. Whoever

heard Of a three-sided battle?

Mutually bedevilled, both belligerents postponed their on-slaughts while they continued to try and get ready, meanwhile blundering around like a pair of once-eager boxers temporarily diverted from their original purpose by the sudden appearance of numerous ants in the pants.

And the ants kept them on the hop. Lawson's vessel plum-meted unseen and undetected right into the middle of the Nilean hemisphere, picked up three boats thundering along under orders to patrol off a certain planet, put them down on said planet for keeps. So far as the Nilean order-giver was concerned, three of his vessels had commenced to move in obedience to commands, had continuously signalled progress, then cut off without warning as if snatched out of Creation. He sent a light fast scout to discover what had occurred. That one radiated messages until within viewing distance of the ap

pointed post and went silent. He sent another. Same result. It was like dropping pennies down the drain. He gave up, re-ported the mystery to battle headquarters, sought under his back-strap for a persistent nibbler that had been pestering him all day.

The causes of all this cussedness would have been identified more quickly and easily had one crew been able to beam a warning that they were about to come under the mental mastery of those in a strange vessel of unknown origin. But none were ever aware of what was about to happen. None were aware that it had happened until the cause had gone else-where, the influence had been removed and they found them-selves sitting on solid earth and dumbfoundedly contemplating a vessel converted to so much scrap.

It was like stealing lollipops from the inmates of a babies' home except that there always lurked an element of danger due to lining up of fortuitous circumstances that none could anticipate. Ellis and his ship and crew went out of existence in a brilliant flash of light when they dived down upon what appeared to be a Nilean flotilla moving at sedate pace toward the hemisphere's rim and discovered one millipart too late that it consisted of a heavy cruiser shepherding under remote control a group of unmanned booby traps.

Every Solarian in the tremendous area knew of this counter-blow the instant the stroke took place. Everyone sensed it as a sudden cessation of life that has been a small part of one's own. It was like the complete vanishing from one's mind of a long-held and favorite thought. None brooded. None felt a pang of regret. They were not inclined to such sentiment because sorrow can never remove its own cause. A few hairs had fallen from an immense corporate whole, but the body remained.

Half a time-unit afterward James Lawson and his crew exacted sweet revenge, not with that motive, but purely as a tactic. They did it by making opportune use of the enemy's organizational setup which like many sources of great strength was also a source of great weakness. Weld men and materials into a mighty machine and they are thereby converted into something capable of mighty collapse the moment the right nut or bolt is removed.

A formidable Nilean battle squadron of one hundred forty assorted ships was running out of the hemisphere in a great, curving course that eventually would

position them slightly behind the extreme wing of Markhamwit's assembly. This was the strictly orthodox move of trying to place a flanking party strong enough to endanger any main thrust at the center. If Markhamwit's scouts spotted this threat, his array would have to divert a force able to meet and beat it. It was all so easy for those who sat in opposing battle headquarters, planning and counter-planning, directing vessels here and there, operating the great combat machines.

And just because the machines were machines, Lawson had no difficulty in pulling out an essential bolt. He took over the entire squadron lock, stock and barrel. All that was necessary was for Nfam and Path to gain mental mastery of those aboard the admiral's vessel commanding the rest. One ship! The others did exactly as this enslaved vessel ordered, moving through space like a flock of sheep.

The big squadron turned into a new course, built up to top velocity because the admiral's boat so ordered. They ignored the now visible Solarian stranger in their midst because the admiral unquestioningly accepted its presence. They pushed for their faraway home world as fast as they could drive because The Boss so commanded.

Lawson stayed with them to the halfway point and long after he'd left they continued on course, made no attempt to return. The Boss was not going to admit to an entire fleet that he was afflicted with mental confusion, could not remember receiving or transmitting an order to head for home. Obviously he must have had such instructions, or why were they *here*, making for where they were going? Best to keep straight on and hide the fact that he was subject to spasms of dopiness. So on they went, one hundred forty vessels bam-boozled right out of the fray.

In short time Reeder's vessel performed a similar service for the Great Lord. A reserve force of eighty-eight ships, mostly heavy cruisers, pushed homeward with closed signal channels in accordance with orders from their own egmmanding offi-cer. Soon informed of this unauthorized departure, the top brass at battle headquarters foamed at the mouth, switched switches, levered levers and stabbed buttons,. filled the ether with contra-commands, threats and bloodthirsty promises while still the reserve continued to blunder through the star-field with all receivers sealed and no mutinous ears burning.

Bombs and bullets are of little avail without intelligence to direct them. Take away the intelligence, if only for a little while, and the entire warmaking appurtenances of a major

power become so much junk. The Solarian attack was irresistibly formidable because it was concentrated on the very root-cause of all action, the very motivating force behind all instruments great or small. Solarian logic argued that gun-plus-mind is a weapon whereas gun-without-mind is a mere article no matter how inherently efficient.

The Nilean booby traps were no exception, neither was any other robotic arm, for in effect they were delayed action weapons from which minds had gone into hiding by removing themselves in space and time. The minds originating each booby trap were difficult to trace, hence the fate suffered by Ellis and his crew. But in the long run they were being dealt with as ship after ship became grounded, squadrons, flotillas and convoys departed for someplace else and chaos threatened to become complete. In proof of which the jumpy Nilean high command twice made serious

errors by diverting ships that sprang their own traps and thus added a pleasing note to the general confusion.

By the fiftieth time-unit the Solarians had an imposing array of statistics to consider. Fourteen ships destroyed by accident, including one of their own. Eight hundred fifty-one vessels nailed down to various inhabitable planets and satellites. One thousand two hundred sixty-six shiploads of the mentally de-ceived hellbent for other places, mostly home. Increasing evi-dence of demoralization in the battle headquarters of both belligerents. Truly the long term chivvyng of weaker neutrals was being paid for, heavily, with compound interest. It might be sufficient to convince stubborn minds that a myth can be a very real thing when dragged out of the past and dumped into the present day.

They conferred among themselves and across a galactic gap while their ships continued to flash to and fro. If the oppos-ing parties' battle headquarters were taken under mental con-trol the entire war parade could be scattered through the heavens at a few imposed words of command. They were re-luctant to take matters as far as that. It would come much too near a demonstration of near-godlike dictatorship over all lesser creatures.

The basic Solarian idea was to create respect for an essential law by creating respect for those behind it. To overdo the job by just a little too much would be to establish wholesale fear of themselves throughout the galaxy. Some dread here and there could not be avoided when dealing with less developed minds inclined to superstition, but they were deeply anxious not to create ineradicable fear as a substitute for enlightened tolerance. Since they were trying to cope with two kinds of alien minds not identically the same, it was a touchy matter judging exactly how far they must go in order to achieve the desired result while avoiding the other. How many times should a candidate for baptism be dunked to give him salvation without pneumonia?

By mutual consent they carried on for another time-unit, at the end of which the movements of vessels still controlled by the top brass showed that Nilean forces were striving to re-group in readiness for withdrawal. Their answer to that was to cease all blows at Nileans and concentrate exclusively on Markhamwit's equally confused but more mulish armada, Though slower to make up their minds, the Great Lord's com-manders were swifter to act once they'd reached a decision. In due time they saw without difficulty that this was an inau-spicious date for victory and they'd do better to bide next Friday week. Which means that they started to pull out, fast.

"Enough!"

It flashed from mind to mind, and Lawson said with approval, "Good work, boys."

"Our work invariably is first class," assured Nfam. Re-moving his toque, he blew imaginary dust from it, smoothed its feather, put it on at a rakish angle. "I have earned myself a new bonnet."

"Treat yourself to a new head while you're at it," advised the thought-form of Buzwuz from his haunt nearer the stern.

"Petty spitefulness characteristic of the child-like," com-mented J1ath, nodding his fez until its crimson ribbon waggled. "I have long been intrigued by a phenomenon that someday must be investigated."

"Such as?" prompted Nfam.

"The nearer they are to Sol, the higher in intelligence. The farther out, the lower."

Buzwuz shrilled back, "Let me tell you, Spider-shape, that outside the Asteroid Belt they're—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Lawson, thus staking a biped claim in this scramble for superiority.

They went quiet, not because they were overawed by him, not because they considered him any better or worse than themselves, but souly because it was notorious that his two-legged kind could argue the tail off an alligator and cast grave doubts upon its parentage while doing so. If the Solarian mass mind had a special compartment reserved for flights of vocal

fancy duly embellished with pointed witticisms it was without doubt located on a dump called Terra.

So they held their peace while he boosted the speed and headed for the gypsy planet on which two ships already were waiting to collect the various homarachnids and take them nearer home. There was no need to consult star maps and seek the highly erratic course of the wandering sphere. He could have chased it across half the galaxy and hit it dead center with his eyes shut. All that was needed was to steer straight along the thought-stream emanating from the pair of Solarian vessels waiting there.

It was as easy as that.

CHAPTER XI

THE follow-up process was delayed. Held back deliberately and of malice aforethought. The sluggish communications systems of warring life-forms had been greatly to the advantage of Solarians, but now time must be allowed for those same systems to deliver data to Markhamwit and Glastrom. No use Lawson and Reeder taking them the news in person. They would not be believed until confirmation arrived in large dollops.

And after the warlords had gained a clear picture of recent events further time must be given for the complete digestion thereof. Since the Nileans were by nature a little more impulsive and a little less stubborn than their opponents it was likely that they would be the first to agree that it is unprofitable to play hob with common property such as the free space between worlds.

Markhamwit would be the last to give in. He would have a soul-scaring period of balancing loss of face against the growing pile of awkward facts. He must have time to work out for himself that it is better to drop an autocratic obsession than ultimately drop at the end of a rope. Being what he was—a prominent member of his own kind—he'd have no illusions about the fate of one who insists on leading his people to total defeat.

A couple of days before the Nileans were due to become mentally ripe, Reeder burst through the defense screen of their home world, dropped a packet in Glastrom's palace yard, whipped back into the eternal starfield before guards or aerial patrols fully realized what had taken place.

Ten time-units later—making carefully estimated allowance for Markhamwit's more reluctant character—Lawson obliged with a similar bundle that crowned the fat Kasine as he waddled across the area outside the interrogation center. The thump

on that worthy's dome was not intentional. Nobody could go by at such pace and achieve such perfection of aim. It was wholly accidental, but to the end of his days Kasine would never believe it.

Struggling to his feet, Kasine addressed a few well-chosen words to the sky, took the bundle indoors, gave it to the cap-tain of the guard who gave it to the garrison commander who gave it to the chief of intelligence. That official immediately re-called the fate of a predecessor who hurriedly burst open a parcel from someone who was not a friend. So with the mini-mum of delay he passed it to Minister Ganne who with equal alacrity handed it to the addressee, the Great Lord Markham-wit, and found an excuse to get out of the room.

Viewing the unwanted gift with much disfavor, Markhamwit found his plug and tube, called the chief of intelligence, or-dered him to provide an expendable warrior to come lean out the window and open the thing. The chief of intelligence told the garrison commander who told the captain of the guard who duly pushed along a loyal thickhead of low rank and no importance.

The task performed without dire result, Markhamwit found himself with a thick wad of star maps. Spreading them over his desk he stared at them irefully. All bore liberal markings, with certain worlds and satellites clearly numbered. On the re-verse side of each was a list of ships stalled on the appropriate spheres, plus roughly estimated strength of crews thus ma-rooned and a further estimate of how long each group could survive unaided.

The longer he studied this collection the more riled he felt. Approximately one-fifth of his total forces had been put out of action according to this data. One-fifth of his battle-wagons were scrap metal scattered far across the light years. Assuming that it would be asking for" further trouble to employ armed vessels, it would require full use of his gunless merchant-fleet to rescue and bring home the crews languishing on a couple of hundred worlds. And if he made no attempt to save them there would be trouble aplenty on this world.

He did not know it, but he had another twenty time-units in which to think things over.

At the end of that period Lawson returned.

The second arrival was exactly like the first. At one moment the plain stood empty, with the city gray and grim in the north, the bluish sun burning above and the smallest of the three moons going down in the east. Next moment the ship was there, a thin streak of dust settling behind its tail as it to show that there had been motion even though unseen.

Overhead the aerial patrol circled and swirled as before. This time there was some risk that they might bomb without waiting for orders. A slick trick creates greater fury when re-peated and sometimes becomes too much to bear.

"If a man does thee once it's *his* fault; if he does thee twice it's thy fault!"

But again the Solarian visitor's behavior was that of one completely unconscious of such dangers or completely indiffer-ent to them. It lay on the plain, a clear target. The patrol dropped nothing but did scream the news to the city's chief communications center.

Consequence was that a couple of truck-loads of troops raced onto the plain even

as Lawson emerged from the lock. He came out breathing deeply, enjoying the fresh air, the feel of solid earth underfoot. Several winged shapes buzzed ecstatically out of the lock, zoomed into the sky, chased after each other and put over a bee-version of sailors in port.

Disregarding the oncomers from the city, the bee-minds were swapping thoughts intended mainly for the benefit of the biped. They deplored his lack of wings. They questioned the wisdom of Nature in putting sentient life upon two inadequate feet. Ah, the pity of it all!

So far as Lawson and *his* crew were concerned the truck-loads making toward them contained an armed company of mental moppets of no particular shape or form. And Mark-hamwit himself would have been appalled to learn that his own status was that of the muscular bully of grade one.

The trucks pulled up and the troops tumbled out. Though Lawson did not know it, his attitude and expression had been perfectly duplicated in the dawn of *history* by a gentleman named Casey who wore a cap and badge. The corner cop watching the kids come out of school. The lesson learned was the same now as then, produced the same results: the unruly members of this crowd had had to be taught respect for Casey.

They'd learned it all right; it was evident from what they did next. There was no hostile surrounding of the ship, guns loaded and held ready. Instead they formed up in two ranks, wide apart like a guard of honor, A three-comet officer marched forward, saluted ceremoniously.

"Sire, you have returned to see the Great Lord?"

"I have." Lawson blinked, looked him over. "Why the 'sire'? I do not have any military rank."

"You are the ship's commander," said the other, signing toward the vessel.

"I am its pilot," Lawson corrected. "Nobody commands it."

With a touch of desperation, the officer ended the disconcerting talk by motioning toward a truck. "This way, sire."

Grinning to himself, Lawson climbed into the cab, was driven citywards. He kept silence during the journey. The officer did likewise, inwardly feeling that this was one of those days when one can be tempted to say too much.

The Great Lord Markhamwit was sitting in his chair with his four arms lying negligently on its rests, his features smooth and composed. Many days ago he had been in a choleric frenzy of activity as he strove to organize a war that refused to jell. A few days back he'd been in a blind fury, pacing the room, hammering the table, volleying oaths and threats as a volcano spews lava. A few time-units ago reaction had set in as he contemplated an enormous mass of frustrating data topped by the star maps that had bounced off Kasine. Now he was re-signed, fatalistic. It was the calm after the storm. He was near-ly ripe for reason.

This was to be expected. Solarian tactics did not accord paramount importance to the question of *what* must be done to achieve a given end. It was of equal and occasionally of greater importance to determine precisely *when* it must be begun, how long it must be maintained and *when* it should be ended. Words like *how* or *what* did not dominate a word like *when* in Solarian thinking.

Circumstances were radically altered when Lawson ambled into the room for his third interview. His manner was the same as before, but now Markhamwit and Ganne studied him with wary curiosity rather than bellicose irritation.

Seating himself, Lawson crossed his legs, smiled at the Great Lord rather as one would at an obstreperous child after a do-mestic scene.

"Well?"

Markhamwit said slowly and evenly, "I have been in direct touch with Glastrom. We are recalling all ships."

"That's being sensible. More's the pity that it's had to be paid for by many of your crews languishing on lonely worlds."

"We have agreed to cooperate in bringing them home. The Nilcans pick up and deliver any of our people they find. We do the same for them."

"Much nicer than cutting each other's throats, isn't it?" Markhamwit countered, "You told me you didn't care." "Neither do we. It's when innocent bystanders get pushed

around that we see fit to chip in."

Lawson made to get up as if at his stage his task was finished because Solarian aims had been gained. Nothing daunted, the Great Lord spoke hurriedly.

"Before you go I'd like answers to three questions." "What are they?"

"In honest fact do you come from a galaxy other than this one?"

"Most certainly."

Frowning at a secret thought, Markhamwit went on, "Have you sterilized any world belonging to us or the Nileans?" "Sterilized?" Lawson registered puzzlement.

"As you are said to have done to the Elmones."

"Oh, that!" He dismissed it in the manner of something never contemplated even for a moment. "You're referring to an incident of long, long ago. We used weapons in those days. We have outgrown them now. We harm nobody."

"I beg to differ." Markhamwit pointed to the star maps piled up on one side. "On your own showing eight of my ships have been destroyed, crews and all."

"Plus five Nilean vessels and one of our own," Lawson said. "All by accidents over which we had no control. For example, two of your cruisers collided head-on. Our presence had noth-ing to do with it."

Accepting this without dispute, Markhamwit leaned for-ward, put his last question. "You have established a law that free space shall be completely free to all. We have recognized it. We have given in. I think that entitles us to know why you are so interested in the space ethics of a galaxy not your own."

Standing up, Lawson met him eye for *eye*. "Behind that query lurks the agreement you have just made with Glastrom, namely, that you drop all your differences in the face of com-mon peril from outside. You have secretly agreed to conform to the common law until such time as you have developedships as good as or better than our own. Then, when you feel strong enough, you will join together and shave us down to whatever you regard as proper size."

"That does not answer my question," Markhamwit pointed out, not bothering to confirm or deny this accusation. "The answer is one you'll fail to see."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Well, it's like this," Lawson explained. "Solarians are not a shape or form. They'

re a multikind destined ultimately to lose identity in a combine still greater and wider. They are the be-ginning of a growth of associated minds designed to conquer universal matter. The free, unhampered use of space is the

basic essential of such growth." "Why?"

"Because the next contributions to a cosmos-wide supermind will come from this galaxy. That's where the laugh is on you." "On me?" The Great Lord was baffled.

"On your particular life-form. You overlook the question of time. And time is all-important."

"What do you mean?"

"By the time either you or the Nileans have created tech-niques advanced enough to challenge us even remotely, both you and they will be more than ready for assimilation."

"I don't understand."

Lawson went to the door. "Someday both you and the Nil-eans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, com-ponents of a mightier whole. You will come to it rather late but you'll get there just the same. Meanwhile we will not allow those in front to be held back by those behind. Each comes in his own natural turn, delayed by no pernicky neighbors."

He smiled. Then he departed.

"My lord, did you understand what he meant?" Minister Ganne said.

"I have a glimmering." Markhamwit was thoughtful. "He was talking about events not due until five, ten or twenty thousand years after we two are dead."

"How did he get to know our arrangement with Glastrom?"

"He doesn't know since nobody could have told him. He made a shrewd guess, and he was absolutely correct as we are aware." Markhamwit brooded a bit, added, "It makes me won-der how close he'll get with his longer shot."

"Which one, my lord?"

"That by the time we're big enough to dare try beat up what he calls his multikind it will be too late, for we shall then be part of that multikind."

"I can't imagine it," admitted Ganne. .

"I can't imagine people crossing an intergalactic chasm. Neither can Yielm or any of our experts," Markhamwit said. "I can't imagine anyone successfully waging a major war with-out any weapons whatsoever." His tone became slightly pee-vish as he finished. "And that supports the very one of his points that I dislike the most: that our brains are not yet ade-quate. We suffer from limited imaginations."

"Yes, my lord," agreed Ganne.

"Speak for yourself," snapped Markhamwit. "I can stir up mine a bit even if others can't. I'm going to see Glastrom in person. Maybe we can get together and, by persuasion rather than by force, so reorganize the galaxy that it becomes too big and strong and united to be absorbed by any menagerie from elsewhere. It's well worth a try." He stopped, stared at Ganne, demanded, "Why do you look like a bilious skouniss?"

"You have reminded me of something he said," explained Ganne unhappily. "He said, 'Someday both you and the Nil-eans will be inseparable parts of each other and, like us, com-ponents of a mightier whole.' If you go to see Glastrom it means

we're heading exactly that way—already!"

Markhamwit flopped back in his chair, gnawed the nails on four hands in turn. He hated to admit it but Ganne was right. The only satisfactory method of trying to catch up on Solari-an competition was to toil along the same cooperative path to the same communal end that could not and would not remain compartmented in one galaxy. Not to try was to accept defeat and sink into dark obscurity that ultimately would cover them for all time, making them like the Elmones, a name, a memory, a rumor.

There were only two ways to go: forward or backward. Forward to the inevitable. Or backward to the inevitable. And it had to be forward.

Lawson returned to the ship and he knew that his crew already were aboard and eager to go. Getting out of the truck, he thanked the driver, walked toward the lock, stopped when nearby arid carefully examined the sentry posted outside it.

"I think we have met before," he offered pleasantly.

Yadiz refused the bait. He kept tight hold on his gun, ignored the voice, ignored a couple of persistent itches. One learns by experience he had decided, and when in the presence of a Solarian the safest thing is to play statues.

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it." Lawson shrugged, climbed into the lock, looked down from the rim and advised, "We're taking off. There'll be some suction. If you don't want a sudden rise in the world you'd better take shelter behind that rock."

Thinking it over, Yadiz decided to take the suggestion. He marched toward the indicated point, still saying nothing.

Lawson sat in the pilot's seat, fingered the little lever. Far out at the edge of the galaxy, lost to view in the great spray of stardust, were a pair of life-forms developing a kindred spirit. Near to them was a third form, more numerous, arrogant and ready to fill the power vacuum left by Glastrom and Markhamwit. Far out there among the stars the stage was set for interference. Something must be done about it. A few knuckles must be rapped. He moved the lever.