

# In A Misty Light

by Richard Varne

*In the mist-shrouded darkness of an alien planet the espionage agent was given a vital secret to take back to Earth. That was the easy part of the assignment—the difficult part was to get off the planet.*

Illustrated by Bradshaw

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[Notes](#)

All through the afternoon and evening, a humid wind had swept thick clouds in from the east, and now a heavy night heat enveloped Mek.

Sands walked a narrow side street leading towards the waterfront, keeping into the deeper shadows cast by the ramshackle buildings that made the alley a canyon of darkness. He looked around him warily, and once he shivered, although the night was oppressively warm. The moon shone momentarily through the veil of cloud that hid its lurid surface, and Sands moved quickly into the doorway of a shop until the protecting darkness returned. He cautiously stepped from the shop porch, looking behind him, searching the length of the dark alleyway before he moved on.

All around him, the city was silent, but it was not sleeping. In an atmosphere of tension and superstitious fear, families sat quietly in unlighted rooms, behind curtained windows, waiting out the night of the year when Copan spirits were abroad.

Sands began to look at the ideographs set beside the entrance until he found the one that he was looking for. It was the number of a shop that—Sands moved back a pace and strained his eyes to read the ideographs along the shopfront—that sold antiques. Sands grinned a tightly mirthless grin, and his teeth shone whitely for a second, then he stepped towards the shopfront and looked in the tiny leaded window. Inside, he could only make out vague shapes, with some sparkling highlights from a yellow strip of light showing underneath a door at the other side of the shop. He went into the entrance porch. Cobwebs hung from the once whitewashed walls, and the door in front of him was covered with peeling paint. Sands stood undecided for a moment, then put out a hand and pushed at the door. It opened with a creak of corroded hinges.

Sands stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

In the thick darkness of the shop, Sands could distinguish very little of the objects that he sensed surrounded him. He moved a step further into the shop, and knocked something over with a tinkling crash. He stood still and felt in front of him with his hands. He was moving another hesitant step when the snip of light at the other side of the shop grew a vertical which rapidly widened as the door opened. He could see the silhouette of a girl in the doorway, bending slightly forward with a hand against the lintel. There was a questioning attitude about her. Sands said softly, "Null-A." He waited.

Flexa looked at Sands in the light from the open door. Radiance striking on his high cheekbones gave him a vaguely Satanic appearance. He stood there confidently. *You were always too confident*, she thought.

She gave the signal of recognition. “Korzybski.”

Sands let out a soft breath of relief. He began to walk forward, picking his way through a litter of china kyilins and vases. He could see the warm sheens of their patinas reflecting the soft light from the doorway, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the brighter, metallic gleams of antique weapons and armour lining the walls. The girl stepped back into the inner room and waited there, out of direct sight from the street.

Sands walked through the doorway and turned quickly, scrutinising the room. There was nobody else there. He shut the door softly and studied the girl, saving nothing. She stood quite still, waiting patiently, knowing that he was examining her and realising that the whole success of her venture might depend on this first impression.

She was Copan, with the Copan cast of features and abnormally sloping shoulders. Her hair was black, with soft highlights in it from the lime gas-mantle that illuminated the room. Her face was quite expressionless.

Sands transferred his gaze to the room again. It was almost bare of furniture, with only a desk, piled with dusty ornaments, and a chair in one corner. The rest of the space was taken up with a pile of canvas-shrouded pictures, more ceramic work, and some statues of ugly, half-reptilian animals. There were patches of damp on the plaster walls and ceiling, more evidence of the everlasting dampness and humidity of Copan, and one heavily curtained window. It was obviously a room that was hardly ever used, and definitely never lived in.

Sands stood very still, unrelaxing, with harsh lines creasing his face. He looked back to the girl, staring at her with dark, humourless eyes.

“What the hell is all this about?” He spoke angrily, the difficult vowels of the Copan language falling oddly from his lips.

The girl stirred from her position by the wall, turned to face him directly. “I am from Earth.” She spoke in English. Sands grunted in disbelief.

“You don’t look it,” he said shortly.

“I don’t expect immediate belief,” she replied coldly, “but you must at least give me a few minutes to convince you.”

Sands felt a slight stirring of annoyance, deep within himself at the moment, but ready to erupt as it had done so many times in the past. What he had taken for a lack of emotion in the girl had revealed itself to be a self-possession which matched his own, and his realisation destroyed the sense of superiority which had possessed him.

“Where were you born?” he asked.

“London,” she said softly.

The word conjured up a sudden flow of memories, and with them, emotions which he had thought lost to him, lost somewhere on the path to maturity. London, with the fresh, earthy smell of the quiet, archaic city squares just after rain... the long sweep of the Embankment and the pastel shades of the buildings that lined it... the noise and colour of the street markets. He pulled himself back to the present, before the slow procession of remembrance inevitably brought Laura back to him, as it had done so many times before he had finally achieved his ultimate self possession.

“What’s the name of the lake in Hyde Park?” he asked abruptly.

She answered immediately “ The Serpentine.”

Sands was not convinced. If she actually was from Earth, why did she look Copan, and what did she want with him, in any event? He knew himself to be a rover, a star-drifter who could not return to Earth because an obsession had grown slowly into a psychological block against it. The import deal that he was putting through on Copa was reasonably legal, as well. He could think of no reason for her interest. Suddenly he realised that these objections had been raised to substantiate an emotional belief that she was lying, caused by his first annoyance with her.

“What do you want with me?” he asked bluntly.

She moistened her lips slightly, unconsciously, and although her self-assurance did not falter, Sands could see that she had realised that he had already decided against her.

“I am an Earth agent,” she began. “I was trained, surgically operated on for Copan appearance, and planted here when I was eighteen years old. The reason for my presence here isn’t of much importance, normally, since I’m only the secretary to a somewhat minor economist and exporter, and my work is merely studying the flow and direction of Copan interstellar trade at its source.” She paused.

“Six months ago, I began to see that there was something in the wind. Lewsen, my employer, is in partial control of one of the biggest trading corporations, Copan Interstellar Trade, an organisation dealing mainly with luxury imports, and he began to spend more and more time controlling this, and less with his economics work. Now, this isn’t especially unusual, but what was unusual was that he didn’t use me to help him. At first I thought that this was mere business caution, a big deal which he didn’t want to leak out, but, well, he’s trusted me before. Then I thought he suspected that I was an agent, but I realised that was obviously impossible, since I have never made him suspicious, I’m sure of that. Well, now I know what he was trying to conceal, and it’s really big.”

Anger rose in Sands like a seething tide.

“And may I ask what this so important secret is?” he asked with ponderous sarcasm.

Was that fear in her face?

“I can’t tell you.”

Sands lost his temporarily amused look; his heavy brows lowered.

“You lure me down here with a note semantically phrased to arouse my curiosity, and then you spin me this wild rigmarole.” His voice was low and furious. “Do you know what this place is, woman?” he continued. “It’s certain death to Earthmen. Why, there isn’t another Terran on the planet who would dare to come into this area of Mek, not even to-night, on the Night of the Spirits.”

“I know that,” said the girl. “And because I have access to a dossier on every Earthman on Copa, I can also see that you’re the only man who can do what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“I want you to take the information back to Earth for me.”

Sands laughed openly.

“And why should I do that?”

She moved towards him.

“I know you, Sands. You’re resourceful, cunning, clever, and you haven’t stopped moving once since

you left Earth fifteen years ago. You are the ideal man for the job. And you have a certain psychological instability which will force you to do this.”

Sands said angrily, “If you know me so well, Flexa, or whatever you called yourself in your note, you’ll know that I can’t return to Earth, even though I want to.” His eyes held a faraway bitterness. He moved towards the door.

She moved quickly in front of him, and leaned her back against the door. “Wait!”

Sands put out a hand and grasped her shoulder; he began to push her aside. Then he stopped.

“Well?”

She put a hand to the front of her dress and produced a small capsule. She held it out to him, and he took it. He weighed it reflectively on the palm of his hand, feeling its gentle warmth. Inside him, the old excitement began to rise, the thrill of new suns and new places and new situations stirred him again. All this, from one small message capsule.

Flexa watched him, interpreting his changing attitude with the case of training and practice. She had played on his instability, she knew, the instability which she herself had first stimulated, and she felt a faint self-disgust, and a wonder as she saw the change in the man.

“This is it,” said Sands, stating rather than questioning.

The woman nodded.

Sands stood very still, thinking.

His decision made, Sands put aside the thoughts of the multifarious avenues that it opened up and concentrated singlemindedly on the present. He turned his head slowly and looked at Flexa.

“Why do you want me to take it back to Earth?” he asked. “I always thought that an espionage service had dozens of ways to get information back Home.”

“Just about the time that I began to see that there was something big coming up, all the post office services that I know of were raided simultaneously. It seems that Earth Intelligence underrated the Copans slightly.” She smiled a wry smile. “So there I was, cut off from Earth. I decided that I might as well stay here and carry on, because if the Copans know I’m an agent, they’ll arrest me if I try to leave the planet, anyway.”

“Of course, they might have left you alone to see if you’ll contact any other lines of communication,” said Sands.

Sands threw the capsule up in the air and caught it again.

“How did you get hold of it?” he asked cautiously.

The tight hold that the girl held on her emotions slipped for a moment, and a tiny flicker of revulsion crossed her face.

“I’m getting around to that,” she said, “but I’ll have to make it fast... I estimate that I’ll be caught by morning.”

Sands’ jaw dropped slightly, but he said nothing.

“You know the set-up on this planet as well as I do,” she went on. “As long as the Copans keep to

their system of different corporations for each industry and utility and have little co-ordination between them, the Earth system of colonising and trade will be safe from the Copans, but you can see what would happen if something or someone formed a special circumstance where the corporation controllers would be obliged to amalgamate and satisfy the naturally warlike nature of the Copan race. The majority of the corporation heads are quite satisfied with the present status quo which leaves them undisputed hereditary rulers and they want war as little as we do, but some of them can see that the situation now is unstable as long as it remains static, and if, just by chance, they had the opportunity to alter it, I don't think that they would hesitate."

She stopped talking for a moment, and Sands digested what she had said. "And this secret that you have is that circumstance and their opportunity?"

"Yes." Then she went on, "About a week ago, a man came to see Lewsen at his home. He's a bachelor, by the way, and my position as his private secretary involves a little overtime work, if you see what I mean."

Sands saw.

"So I was in his house when this man arrived. I recognised him as the controller of the United Chemicals Corporation, and he was the straw that showed me definitely the way the wind was blowing. He stayed locked in his room for the first three days, and during that time Lewsen brought his associates from Interstellar Trade to see him. After that, he emerged for a day, and I realised that whatever business had brought him to see Lewsen was satisfactorily completed.

"I had to find out what that was, so I began making a play for him. I could see that Lewsen was displeased, but I was gambling on the supposition that he wouldn't say or do anything that would offend Grigg, the United Chemicals man.

"This evening I went to his room. I had *Noviate* with me. You know what that is?"

Sands did indeed. It was a biological product extracted from an animal of the tropical Altair VI swamps and was injected into the subject at the height of an emotional disturbance. It was essentially a truth serum, and the effects on the subject were rather brutal.

"Grigg was foul." The woman wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Very fat and rather like something that you find under a rock. I injected him with the *Noviate* at the right moment." She spoke dispassionately, as if she was describing somebody else's experiences. Sands shuddered.

"He told me where he had hidden the information and he told me what it was about, I don't think that I could have even found it without doing what I did."

So that makes it all right for you, does it? thought Sands disgustedly. That gives your conscience a let-out.

Aloud, he said, "What happened to Grigg?"

"He was a hopeless idiot when I left him."

What makes you do things like this for Earth? thought Sands; I wonder what Earth could have done for you?

"Do you think that you'll be caught?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'll be caught by morning. The Copan Security Police have a scent analysis of my body."

Sands said, "I'd better get going." He stood there awkwardly. Somehow, the woman's casualness had frozen the atmosphere in the room.

"Yes," she said.

There didn't seem much more to say, and Sands went towards the door.

"Not that way," said Flexa. "Out of the window."

Sands climbed onto the desk beneath the window, and pulled aside the curtain an inch.

"It leads to an alley," said Flexa.

The Terran put his hand behind the curtain, and fumbled with the catch of the window. It swung open, and the curtain bellied inwards under the pressure of the wind.

He automatically pushed back a fold of his cloak and put a hand on his gun, somehow drawing strength from its presence as he had done so often before. He felt confused, as if he had been persuaded into a hasty action, as if someone had moved the strings that make the puppet dance, or pulled out the right emotional stops. Still, when he considered the situation rationally, he could see that his action was the correct one, for if the woman had done what she said, they would be connected up sooner or later, and the Copans would have little mercy with aliens who had murdered a Corporation Controller.

He turned.

"Well, this is it."

The girl said nothing at first. Then, "Good luck."

"And to you. Say, I don't even know your English Christian name. What is it?"

Flexa looked at him, at his strongly shadowed face. It's funny how love and the memories of love fade, she thought. Then she made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Mary," she said, and knew another memory had been stamped *Cancelled*.

The door swung open and crashed against the wall.

They stood frozen in an insane tableau; the man on the desk, the girl half turning, the two uniformed Copan Security Police just inside the door.

The foremost mercenary moved his gun in a peremptory gesture. Sands stepped off the desk and stood beside it, one hand resting casually on a heavy lead coloured statuette, the other hanging slackly at his side. The certainty he had felt that his action was right disappeared and suspicion replaced it; suddenly he experienced a violent reversal of feeling and he realised with a strange neurotic certainty that Flexa was not an Earth agent and that she had betrayed him for some reason that he knew nothing about. Anger boiled.

"You lousy Copan bastards!" he shouted, oblivious of the fact that Copan marriage customs made the insult meaningless.

Flexa felt dismay. The intricate structure of decision and confidence in his own ability to do what she wanted that she had painstakingly built up in the Earthman's mind was disappearing. She had to make a positive action that would convince him that she was actually what she had presented herself to be. It had to be a gesture that would impress him, and, although it seemed ridiculous as she thought it, something that would inspire him.

The two Copans moved forward from the door, and one covered the girl with a peculiar looking weapon as the other encircled the pair.

“Cut the play acting,” said Sands wearily, “I’ve fallen for your frame-up hook, line and sinker.” He stood there quietly, resignedly.

Annoyance inundated Flexa. How could Sands be so stupid? Contriteness replaced her momentary anger... after all, she knew herself to be the basic cause of his instability.

“Would it convince you if I helped you to get away,” she said flatly.

Sands ignored her for a moment, then he said, “You know something, Copan? You’re just too emotionless to be true. I should have realised that at first.”

The two Copan Security Police had stood where they were, listening to the interchange with slightly puzzled expressions on their darkly skinned faces. The one nearest the door still had his weapon aligned on the woman but the one who was moving towards Sands had his gun hanging down by his side.

“Get ready, Sands.”

Sands automatically poised himself, planning out his moves with the greatest economy of motion possible.

Flexa threw herself at the Copan menacing her; he staggered, his arms flailing.

Sands picked up the heavy statuette and half smashed it, half threw it at the forehead of the Copan nearest him. The thud shuddered up his arm as he dropped down beside the desk. There was another thud as the body of the Copan followed him.

He heard sounds of struggling, then a peculiar whistling bang.

The sounds ceased and there was a graveyard silence in the grimy room. Sands’ ears gradually grew accustomed to the lack of noise, and soon he began to hear the faint rustlings of clothes on thread-bare carpet. He lay there motionless... waiting.

Outside, the rain began to fall with a thunderously magnified roar.

Sands considered the situation.

He weighed the gun in his hand, somehow it had automatically jumped there during the brief action.

He put a hand on the heavy carved chair behind the desk, and pushed it to the right as he simultaneously launched himself over the desk.

The Copan was crouching by the door, kneeling behind the body of the girl. The blur of chair and hurtling body confused him for a fraction of a second, and that fraction of a second was the difference between life and death. The Copan’s weapon shifted towards the falling chair for a moment, and his spirit departed to his fathers with a shattered depression the size of a Terran revolver butt in his forehead.

Sands knelt beside the body of the girl for a moment; in death her features were relaxed, free of the constraining lines of character. Somehow the face looked vaguely familiar.

The Earthman stood up with an anger in him that was directed more against governments and worlds and interstellar civilisation than the Copans and the girl who had killed and been killed for money or idealism. Humanity is peculiar, he thought. The people of Earth were generally peace loving, he knew; they were like the lichens which grew on rocks, stagnant, perhaps, but with a quiet peace and beauty of their own. Men like himself who wandered around the galaxy with an itch to see more and more, with an

insatiable desire for new places and the light of strangely coloured suns, were regarded as a throwback to the ages when Man was driven on to conquest and Empire, more by his unstable and stimulating environment than anything else. But still savage undercover war went on; civilisations were directed from their ordained paths by stellar fifth columns; war flamed from the faraway stars and returned to them leaving a drifting planetary cinder to mark its passage; Wealth and Death still ruled the Universe. Why? he thought, looking down at the girl who would be buried in alien soil with a service to another God to speed her soul into interstellar vastness.

He forced his thoughts to the present. Should he take the Copan Security Mobile? He decided against it for the mobiles were too easily recognisable—even if speed was one of the primary considerations, secrecy was equally important, and although the Copans would realise that the information had been passed on, when they could not find it, Sands could see nothing that would connect him with the girl, and he obviously did not want to expose himself unnecessarily.

He climbed through the window into the rain. The avalanche of water soaked him almost immediately.

The square had two roads leading into it from opposite corners. During the day there was a market in the square, but now, there were only one or two deserted stalls left behind, darker patches in the watery night. Rotting refuse, scattered over the wet cobbles that shone faintly in the greyish light from the thick clouds overhead, smelt sickly sweet to Sands as he crouched in the mouth of a dark opening in the blank facade of houses lining one side of the square.

Rain fell steadily out of the darkness, slicking his hair down to his scalp and soaking the heavy material of his cloak. He waited, listening to the rain-muffled footsteps of a solitary walker in the square. There was a sizzling sound, hovering just on the limits of audibility but gradually coming louder... Sands strained his eyes into the darkness and the wetness. Over on the other side of the cobbled expanse, headlight beams appeared, faintly at first but rapidly springing into twin bars of brilliance that swung inexorably along the silent buildings as the mobile turned into the square. Sands flung himself full length on the cobbles, flattening himself into the angle between wall and ground, feeling water soaking into his clothes. The headlights shone directly into the opening, dazzling him and freezing the falling raindrops into momentary immobility.

The mobile went out of sight and Sands moved quickly back into the alley. The headlights reappeared across the narrow slot of the alley mouth, and then the dark ovoid of the mobile came into view. It stopped, blocking the opening of the alley into the square.

Sands swore, very softly. But here was a chance, he realised, to retrieve the adverse situation in which he found himself. For although the routes of the Copan Security Mobiles were almost certainly traced on a radar map of the city, the time that would be lost in catching one, even after the minutes which were bound to elapse before it was realised something was wrong, would more than compensate for the time Sands was gaining before the inevitable pursuit by keeping to the twisting alley mazes of Mek until he was able to get on the road leading to his objective. Which was... the Field. And he had made the mistake of not taking the Security Mobile which the two dead mercenaries had used. Sands smiled an unpleasant little smile and began to decide his course of action. He was in his element when a situation called for violent, senseless action.

The port of the mobile dilated and two men climbed out.

“This is the way they think he’ll come,” said one in a thick North Selthan accent.

“And they’re dead right, too,” said Sands softly, to himself.



The North Selthan turned up his uniform collar and looked up into the sky. All he could see were the long lances of the raindrops falling towards him; splashing off the pale oval of his face.

“By Selen,” he said abruptly, “What a night to be out.” He didn’t mean the rain.

“Only a Terran would go out on the Night of the Spirits,” replied his companion.

Sands began to move, a little at a time, towards the alley-mouth, his hands crooked slightly in front of him.

The Selthan began whistling in a shrill, unmusical manner which cut piercingly through the muted patter of the rain and the gurgle of the little rivulets of rainwater that ran down the cracks between the cobblestones, joining and parting and joining again. His head was eternally moving on its flexible Copan neck, his eyes glistening nervously as they sought to pierce the thick, almost tangible darkness.

There was a faint scraping noise.

“What was that?” said the Selthan’s companion. “Did you hear something?”

The Selthan shook his head and whistled louder than ever; unobtrusively he moved until his back rested against the cool side of the mobile. Selen protect me, he was sub-vocalising over and over again.

There was a louder clatter.

“Hand me a light.”

The Selthan dilated the port of the mobile and went inside, searching for the torch as slowly as he dared.

Outside, there was a muffled struggle, and the Selthan looked slowly over his shoulder, shaking in fright.

From a black indeterminate mass on the cobblestones a dark shape detached itself and came slowly towards the mobile. The Selthan was literally paralysed with terror. The dark shape reached out for him.

Tyres sizzled on wet roads; rain slashed against the windows of the mobile; the shock absorbers took up the strain of violent cornering with a hissing of hydraulics; the motor grumbled softly.

On the seat beside Sands rode the body of the Selthan, rolling slightly on the smooth plastic seat covering; this was because Sands knew that the Security Mobiles invariably had two occupants. He was driving along a main arterial road that led out of Mek and passed by the Field on its way westwards to Selth.

The buildings on either side suddenly became closer and the motor noise increased to an echoing roar; then the mobile with its macabre passenger was through the West Gate of Mek and on the open road.

A light began to blink intermittently on the instrument panel and a tinny voice spoke faintly from somewhere in the cabin. Sands glanced quickly round the cabin and saw a pair of headphones in front of the corpse beside him. He took one hand off the wheel and reached out for the phones. He settled them over his head and listened.

“Mobile Seventeen... Mobile Seventeen... Why are you outside the city limits?” a voice was repeating.

Should he answer? Sands was undecided; this was not an eventuality for which he was prepared. He decided not to, for he knew that his Copan was accented. He drove on, and after a few minutes the voice in the earphones stopped.

Sands drove slowly and carefully, for the road twisted and turned like a snake, and the headlights on the Copan mobile were a trifle inadequate to Terran eyes. The windscreen wipers moved backwards and forwards over the plastic, backwards and forwards... Momentarily there would be a clear arc of glass and Sands would catch a flash of white as a building slid past; then the spots of rain would cover the windscreen and he would be groping along blindly once more.

A long line of reflector eyes picked out a turn and as Sands followed the road round, the corpse beside him slipped against him; its arm flopped across his knees. Sands pushed it away.

The rain drummed monotonously on the roof of the mobile until Sands could hear nothing else; his eyes grew glazed and he drove like an automaton.

Some sixth sense prompted him to look in the rear-view mirror and he saw two pairs of eyes looking at him and growing larger. They stared fixedly.

He snapped out of his daze. How could he have forgotten pursuit?

He drove faster, recklessly, but the following mobiles gradually closed the distance between them. There was a spurt of flame and the bulletproof window on his left was suddenly covered with a network of fine lines. He heard a shrill whine as the high velocity bullet ricocheted away into the night.

A mobile drew level with him and Sands looked into it. In the light from the instrument panel of the other mobile, Sands could see two Copans staring at him. Some detached part of his mind thought how curious it was that he would try to kill these two men, strangers to him but suddenly enemies as well.

Headlights illuminated a ramshackle white fence; it curved to the right and Sands swung the wheel. The mobile slid into the corner in a long drift on the slippery surface and on his left Sands could sense the other mobile braking furiously. The corpse that rode beside him slid suddenly, leaned against him. The dead weight flopped forwards across his arms and the wheel was forced straight. The mobile bucked crazily and struck the pursuers a glancing blow. For a long moment the sides of the mobiles grated together. Sands straightened the mobile and behind him, the other vehicle ran off the road.

It hit a boulder with its offside wheel and bounced back on the road, broadside across the corner.

Sands saw another mobile hit it and then there was a flash as a power plant blew up.

Beside him, the corpse of the Selthan slipped to the floor.

Sands lay damply concealed in undergrowth at the edge of the Field. It had stopped raining an hour before as the strong false-dawn had lightened the sky above a low range of jagged hills in the west, but the tangle of bushes and heathery plants that he lay against were still dripping water, and the ground was marshy. He had driven past the Field and left the mobile roughly concealed in a little wood beside the Selth road.

He was waiting for the sky to lighten with the coming of dawn and as he waited, he was thinking. His thoughts were a patchwork; that he was too far into this morass of intrigue to withdraw now; that he would have at least another hour before the loosely liasoned Field Police were notified to search for him.

That was the trouble with the Copans, they were too unco-ordinated. Sands thought that if they ever became co-ordinated, they could go a long way towards driving Earth out of space and back to the

confines of Sol System. Not that he would care.

He realised that the Copans had worked with extraordinary speed to catch up with Mary and him so quickly. The information contained in the capsule must be important if it could bring the Copan Corporations to a concerted effort.

He thought of Earth, and Laura, and he knew that he had been thinking of her too much recently. Something must have stimulated his memory. Perhaps it had been meeting Mary. He wondered why Mary had done it, why she had given her life for Earth.

When it had grown light enough, he began to study the obstacles that lay between him and his objective.

Immediately around the outside of the Field there was a high wire fence, placed there primarily to keep animals out. Just inside the fence there was a deep drainage ditch, half filled with water. Then there was the wide expanse of the Field itself. It was small; Sands could count only eleven berths, each separated from the next by a hundred yards of open ground. He transferred his attention to the ships themselves.

There were five. One of them was a curiously shaped Copan ship; unloading crated machinery, Sands decided.

Two of the remaining ships were Sirian merchantmen, owned and operated by the Lezau Matriarchy. Those were definitely out of the question. There was an interplanetary ferry, used on the runs between Copan and her radio-actives rich moon. She was surrounded by the bright red, universally used, Radio-actives sign.

The remaining ship was Terran. Sands studied her for a very long time. She was old, one of the Gunthar Class, and solid Swiss workmanship. A little rust-streaked, perhaps, but definitely the best possibility.

That was the one, then.

Sands began planning out his moves as he always did when he had the chance. First he discarded his cloak because it was too heavy and would encumber him. Then he felt in the inside pocket of his one-piece for the message capsule. He took it out and looked at it for a moment; he raised it to his face. There was an elusive perfume to it. He touched it to his lips, feeling the smoothness and the coolness of it; then he replaced it. He put a hand to his belt and adjusted the holster of his gun. He stood up and began to move down the slope towards the fence, feeling dampness between his toes; the spongy heather plants underfoot bubbling up moisture; the bottoms of his loose-fitting breeches catching in bushy grasses. What streak of insecurity made him do things like this, he wondered. He knew what the psychos had told him, all the rigmarole about him being the only one who could cure himself, but that struck him as being illogical. What the hell, anyway.

He found himself at the fence and he studied it for any signs of the insulation which would tell him that the fence was electrified. There were none, so he climbed it quickly and dropped from the top to the Field. Although the ground had been blasted clear of vegetation, little tendrils of growth were already spreading back to the sterile soil. Life is the most resilient thing there is, thought Sands. A man can come back to Earth and find his lover gone, and he can think that he'll be forever dead, but after a while, he'll be able to say "Laura" without wincing, and he'll be able to see women like her without going up to them and calling them by her name. He might blame his sorrow on someone else, like the Government who had refused to help him find her, why, he didn't know, because they kept records of every Terran, but basically, he'd be all right again; just a little dead inside, that's all.

Sands jumped the drainage ditch and set off across the Field at a steady run. He was nearly certain that he would be almost invisible in his by-now mud coloured one-piece, but the longer he hung about with the dawn coming, the easier he would be seen on the level landing field.

He was panting a little when he reached the base of the landing gantry, and he leant against one of the corner girders of the structure as he surveyed the situation.

He tilted his head back and stared up the dizzying perpendicular height of the ship, towering up for two hundred feet, a product of the descendants of men who had built Gothic cathedrals. You could see the similarity. At the extreme tip of her pointed nose, the first rays of the greenish Copan sun were turning the silvery metal to a greenish tint; against the slowly moving clouds in the turquoise sky, she looked at if she was gradually, inexorably, toppling to crush him.

On one fin was red lettering. *S.S. Guntharben Zurich, Schweiz, Terra. 1994 Milliers.*

Sands tried to remember what little he knew of the Gunthar class, obsolete for about a century, now. The Control Bridge was right in the nose with the crew deck immediately below it. Then came the fuel tanks. The overdrive unit was in the centre of the *Guntharben* where it always was on all interstellar drive ships, and the cargo holds occupied the hull between the overdrive unit and the power-room.

The sky had been growing steadily lighter in the north and with rivulets of green fire running down the jagged hill crests and valleys, a livid greenish sliver of Ceta Aurigae II showed above the horizon. Sands realised that he would have to work fast—get aboard the ship first, he told himself, and make your excuses later, when you're aspace.

He transferred, his attention to the loading gantry with its bare angular framework painted garishly in orange anti-rust. The lift was powered and the current was usually cut off for safety, so he couldn't use that. He slid open the door and stepped inside to try the control, anyway. Nothing happened.

He looked up the structure again and noticed that as the *Guntharben* was too tall for the Copan gantry, a makeshift crew platform of planks had been placed across the horizontal braces by the airlock. It made a dark patch against the sky with faint lines of light filtering through the gaps between the planks. He walked round the gantry and saw a ladder. The first thirty feet had been removed to make it useless to thieves.

With the assistance of the slightly smaller Copan gravity and the greater strength of the Earth human, Sands decided that he could perhaps reach the first horizontal brace between the corner girders. He gathered himself and jumped. He fell short by perhaps six inches. He stepped back a few paces and took a short run before jumping again. His fingers hooked round the strut and he pulled himself up. A sharp edge cut one palm and blood ran down his wrist as he reached upwards to the next strut, but he disregarded it.

Soon he reached the foot of the ladder, and with a softly relieved outrush of breath, he transferred himself to it. As he climbed he noticed that the gantry was equipped with a suction loading system, which meant that the cargo of the *Guntharben* was almost certainly granular.

Gradually, his field of view increased with height gained. At about sixty feet up, he stopped to rest, standing on a rung with one arm crooked around a vertical member to keep him steady against the wind that blew harder and harder as he climbed. He could see the warehouses now, a quarter of a mile away at the edge of the Field, with the railway lines looking like gossamer spiders' webs glistening in the early morning dew. Away in one corner was the white concrete tower of Control and at the foot of the gantry were the rusty ratchets of the gantry runners along which the loading gantry was moved when blastoff time came. Sands switched his gaze back to the Control tower where a movement had caught his

attention. By straining his eyes and wiping them clear of wind-induced tears, he could see two mobiles drawing up at the entrance.

He looked up again and began to climb faster. Reach... pull. Reach... pull. Behind him, darker patches of crimson stained the orange painted metal of the gantry.

After another twenty-five feet, Sands reached the level of the cargo landing port. The colossal pipes of the suction loader, supported up here at their mouths by an intricate strutting system, snaked flexibly from the gantry and across a metre of space to the open hatch, where they led over the lip and disappeared into dense blackness.

Sands cursed, his words whipped away by the wind. There was no airlock. That meant that the cargo was stored in vacuum, good for the cargo, perhaps, but bad for Sands if he wasn't wearing a space-suit.

He straddled one of the flexible pipes and moved along it until he was at the lip of the cargo hatch; he looked down inside. He could see a glistening heap of some sort of grain about twenty feet below the hatch. He went back to the ladder and resumed climbing; once he looked down, and the ground was very far away. The crew lock was a hundred and eighty feet up the slim hull of the *Guntharben*.

After another ten minutes of climbing, Sands reached the crew platform. He swung himself over the edge and crouched on the platform, feeling the roughly planed wood of the planks in strange contrast to the smooth cold metal of the gantry. The giant structure of the loading gantry trembled in the wind and Sands shivered in sympathy and nervous reaction. His muscles began to tighten, and with a grunt, he stood upright, his heart beating quickly and his eyes blurring and prickling.

He stood there quietly, his arms hanging loosely, relaxed, at his sides, feeling the wind wrenching at his clothes, the early morning coolness on his face. The outer door of the airlock was slightly ajar, and there was a thin tendril of tobacco smoke coiling out, only to be blown into nothingness. Of course. He should have realised that there would be a dogwatch.

He reached a quick decision and slid the airlock door open a few more inches. Inside, in cool green translucency, a man lay sleeping on a rough couch. A couple of empty bottles stood beside him and a forgotten cigarette drooped between limp fingers.

The spacesuits hung on a rack against one wall.

Sands moved towards them softly, loosening the clips that held one top and bottom. He pulled it away.

The rhythm of breathing from the couch altered, quickened. Sands stood very still. He looked over his shoulder at the little man on the couch. Slowly he turned and went out of the airlock.

Standing outside on the crew platform, he checked over the suit. Food, water, waste remover, oxygen. The material was fairly new, and only one joint showed signs of fraying.

Quickly he climbed down the ladder to the cargo loading port.

He looked at Control. Two tracks led away from the building. He followed them along their length. From behind a vertical girder which had concealed them, the two mobiles that Sands had seen driving up to Control were coming across the Field towards the berths holding the *Guntharben* and the two Lezaun ships.

Sands watched them.

Their tracks diverged like an adder's tongue; one came towards the Lezaun ships and the other towards the *Guntharben*. Sands let himself down over the edge of the loading port, one arm half

encircling a flexible loading pipe. He hung there until the mobile went out of sight beneath him; then he let go.

For half a second he fell, then he landed with a soft thump on the silvery heap of grain. He tried to climb to his feet but the shifting of the grain prevented it. It slid away beneath him and his legs sank further and further into the heap. He sat down quickly to increase the area his weight was pressing down on, and so stop him sinking into the grain.

The end of the loading pipe was within his reach, and he grasped a collar at the end and pulled himself out of the grain. He hung on to the pipe and forced his legs into his spacesuit, then zipped it up, leaving the flexible transparent plastic hood lying on his shoulders.

He moved out of the light from the loading port and slid down the heap until he was at the hull of the spaceship. He leant against the metal plates and heaped grain over his legs and lower body to render him less visible.

He composed himself to wait.

A buzzer sounded in the ship, muffled by the inner door of the airlock. Baker woke up. He yawned widely and rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands, then picked up a battered old cap from the floor and slapped it against his thigh to get rid of the dust. The buzzer rang insistently. Baker put the cap on at a rakish angle, then went to the outer door of the airlock in a leisurely manner and closed it to complete the safety circuits. Hidden fluoros came on automatically and the lock on the inner door released with an audible click.

The buzzer still rang.

Baker pushed the inner door open and went inside the Control Bridge. Although the Bridge occupied the entire nose of the *Guntharben*, Baker had to pick his way between computers and the twin pilot points banked with instruments and controls to reach the radio and radar units which covered one wall. It wasn't instantaneous, of course, no spaceship had the necessary mass to mount one, but it was powerful enough for interplanetary distances.

Baker actuated the receiver. The buzzing stopped.

"S.S. Guntharben from Control...S.S. Guntharben from Control..." came in stilted Terran.

Baker tripped the transmission switch. "S.S. Guntharben here. Come in, Control." He switched to Receive.

"Security have ordered me to inform you that the *Guntharben* must be readied immediately for Customs Investigations. Will you repeat that message, please."

The little man switched to Transmit. He repeated the message, then switched off. He frowned. Blasted nerve, he muttered.

He went into the airlock again, and took one of the impressive looking signal guns from a locker; he opened the outer door of the airlock and looked down. With a whirring of ratchets the lift was rising slowly up to the crew platform. Baker stepped to the edge of the lock and gently moved two of the four planks of the platform until an edge of each was resting on the horizontal brace with only a little overlap. The lift stopped and the door was slid open. There were four men inside it, the first two were in the uniforms of the Field Police with the regulation expressions of steadfast amiability. The other two were Security Police and they bothered with no such formality. They pushed their way forward.

“Get out of the way, Terran,” said one.

“Watch your step,” growled Baker, bringing the formidable signal gun into view. The two Field Police looked disgruntled. One said something in quick Copan to the Security Police which sounded unpleasant. The mercenary barked back, but subsided. There seemed to be little love lost between the two organisations.

One of the Field Police said politely, “I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but we have to make a routine Customs Investigation of the ship.”

Baker said, “So—why the muscle men, then?”

The Field Police said nothing, but one of the Security Police frowned.

“Be careful,” he said.

Baker laughed. “And where’s your authorisation?”

“We don’t need any.” The two mercenaries stepped on to the crew platform.

“You do here,” said Baker, and kicked the two planks off one brace. The planks tipped round the brace they had rested against on the other side and fell off.

Baker looked down the gantry and watched the planks falling. One was blown by the wind and hit a metal member with a clang. After about seven seconds they hit the Field. Baker laughed.

One of the Security Police made to jump the gap to the ship, looked at Baker standing in the airlock door. Baker laughed again.

“Come on,” he said invitingly. The Copan said something under his breath, and moved his hand towards his side arm.

“Naughty,” reprimanded Baker, and raised the signal gun suggestively.

There was a murmured conference, and then the Copans went back into the lift and shut the door. A moment later, the ratchets began to whirr, and the lift dropped away, down the gantry. Baker scornfully spat down the gantry framework and went back into the airlock victoriously. He sat down on the couch and upended a bottle which he produced from beneath the coverings. There was a thirst-quenching gurgle.

Down in the hold, Sands heard the noise of the lift go down past him and breathed a sigh of relief. He leant back against the hull plates again and shut his eyes. He had had no sleep for nearly thirty hours. Presently he dozed.

Half an hour later, the sound of another mobile attracted Baker’s attention. He looked out of the airlock and saw one going towards Control from the Lezaun ships. His curiosity lasted at least ten seconds.

After breakfast, the remainder of the crew of six, who had been in Mek doing the usual things that spacemen on planet leave did, began drifting back, for Mackenzie, the captain, had said that his crew had to be back in the ship a day before blastoff to get the liquor out of their systems. Baker recounted his minor victory to each of them as they arrived, becoming more and more proficient, in the telling, each time.

At ten o’clock the cargo loaders arrived below and started the suction loader; a quarter of an hour after that, Mackenzie arrived, dusty and hot because he had had to walk from Control to the ship. Baker

related his small excitement of the morning, and Mackenzie was not pleased.

He told Baker so, and also described certain operations which he would perform on Baker without anaesthetic if the departure of the *Guntharben* was delayed.

Outside, the green sun rose higher and higher in the turquoise sky, and the heat rose proportionately.

At eleven o'clock the first trainload of silver grain arrived from the warehouse at the edge of the Field and truck by truck the granular contents disappeared into the hungry maw of the suction loader. One of the crew, seeking some fresh air on the replaced crew platform, was the first to notice that there were several official mobiles spaced in a wide circle around the *Guntharben* and that there were two Field Police unobtrusively watching the loading. He told Mackenzie, who cursed Baker.

When the sun was immediately overhead, the loading was finally completed.

Just at this time, the four Copan Police reappeared at the airlock, equipped with all the necessary authorisation to search the *Guntharben*.

Down below, Sands had been dozing when the first avalanche of grain had come flooding in, running down the sides of the pyramid in the hold. It had quickly run up over his legs and thighs and hips. When Sands woke up, his legs were trapped. He realised what had happened and struggled frantically. He couldn't move. When the preliminary trickles of the next intake of grain began, Sands saw his only course. He pulled the plastic hood over his head, zipped it up and turned on his oxygen. As the pressure rose in the suit, the wrinkles in the tough plastic material disappeared and the hood expanded into a bubble enclosing his head. Sands realised that his arms were pinned to his sides and tried to move them; he could not. Slowly, soundlessly, now, the flood of grain rose over his stomach and chest. It reached his neck. Now Sands could only move his head, and he knew the terror of being trapped.

He screamed.

The flow of grain stopped.

Through the slightly distorting plastic the surface of the grain seemed to curve up like the sides of a great bowl. Almost at eye level, Sands could see the millions of tiny seeds, each with a little highlight shaped like a mocking grin on its shiny curved upper surface. He moved his shoulders with a monstrous effort and watched a few grains move. He laughed hysterically. It was like the ancient sand torture, he thought. At any moment he expected to see Arab horsemen galloping across the burning sands to batter his head to a pulp with the glistening black hooves of their rearing horses, or to see a long stream of soldier ants following a trail of honey which led to his unprotected, honey smeared head. He laughed again.

The grain began to rise once more. It rose past his mouth and he felt as if he was choking, even though there was a plastic air-filled bubble between him and suffocation. He could feel only the slightly roughened inside of his suit, and smell only the bitter plastic smell of the material, and hear only his own breathing and the noise of oxygen, and taste only the induced saliva of his own fear. The grain rose past his eyes and he was blinded.

The weight of the grain pressed the suit in all over his body and he could feel the smooth plastic touch his forehead, very softly, like a caress from a woman's hand. Laura, he thought, and lost consciousness. Soon the grain covered him completely and did not stop rising until the shining surface was three feet above his head. The pressure of it could not indent the glistening skin of plastic which stretched between the twin promontories of nose and chin, and so he breathed on steadily with only the hiss of oxygen and



the gentle sussions of his breath to disturb the splendid isolation of his suit.

Captain Mackenzie studied the sheets of ideographs which the Copan mercenary held out to him. He looked knowing.

He stood away from the airlock entrance and let the two Field Police and the two Security Police go by him. He shut the outer door and opened the inner, and the four Copans walked into the Control Bridge with the short hair on their shaven necks perceptibly bristling in suspicion. They looked at Baker who was lounging in one of the control points with an insolent expression on his face.

For all the equipment in the Bridge, there was little cover to hide a man. One of the mercenaries looked into the soundproof cubicle of the radio operator and withdrew his head quickly when he saw the man glare unpleasantly at him over the top of a lurid magazine.

They went down into the quarters below the Bridge and searched it thoroughly, looking under the sprung bunks and in the lockers with their webs of springs to hold the contents firmly during acceleration and free fall. The remaining three of the crew of the *Guntharben* lay on a bunk playing three-pack Kanaster and ignored the searchers completely. The Copans continued their search in the overdrive room.

They stepped gingerly along the narrow catwalks intersecting the overdrive unit and looked down into the mazes of wires and tubes and crystalline feelers with bewildered eyes; even when it was stationary, the overdrive was something far outside the confines of human understanding, for it was the product of cybernetic brains that were the products of cybernetic brains which in their turn were the offspring of yet other creatures of tubes and transistors and circuits, with the roots of this strange new evolutionary tree bedded in the fertile soil of half a million years of humanity.

Finally the searchers departed with no apparent success, yet with the negative knowledge that if the object of their search was not to be found in the *Guntharben* but must be there if the results of the synthesis of many stray pieces of information were correct, then Sands was in the one place that they had not been able to search in the spaceship. Ergo... the hold.

Darkness; metal walled cubicles with anti-detector networks embedded in them; doors which could only be opened by someone familiar with a coded form of an ancient Terran language.

Soft pearly light emanating from a square vision screen shines on a dark figure seated in front of the screen, long fingered hands resting lightly on a sloping shelf of button-inset plastic flutter like pale crabs.

Six similar cubicles, six dissimilar figures, links of traceless radiations between a tumbling chunk of orbiting cosmic slag with a chamber in its heart and a trading vessel plying between tiny islands in a tropical sea, known also as the proving ground for Armaments Incorporated, and four other locations which each nurse an alien cancer.

“We pulled a boner this time, didn’t we?”

A pause. A solemn voice.

“We were following the right course in leaving Flexa where she was, our confidence in her ability was amply justified by her handling of the situation, even when she thought that she was cut off entirely from Earth Intelligence.”

“And the only trouble was that we didn’t happen to be around when she hit the jackpot and she had to get rid of the information using the best material to hand, which happened to be an emotional unstable

acquaintance, coincidentally on Copa at the moment.”

A woman’s voice.

“Well, we were right when we thought that United Chemicals Corporation would use a small outfit like Interstellar Trade to import the materials they would need for mass production of the treatment, and I think that it’s almost certain that Sands is in the hold of the *Guntharben*.”

“The only difficulty is that the Copans seem to think so too, judging by the Security Police they’ve got at approximately two to the metre around the Field.”

“They obviously think they’ve got something good in their discovery.”

“Little do they know!”

Wry laughter.

“Look what we’ve got out of it!”

More wry laughter. Then the more serious voice again.

“Let’s have less of the frivolity. Have we any suggestions which could possibly be of use in drawing off the attention of the Copan Security Police before they immobilise the *Guntharben* and find Sands?”

“One thing’s certain, my solemn friend. The best point to concentrate on is the way they scream blue murder when something goes ‘bang in the dark.’ In other words, their superstitious natures.”

“Three cheers for the most brilliant brain of all Earth Intelligence!”

“Drop dead, will you, girl!”

When the Terran Consul received the complaint from Captain Mackenzie that his ship was being detained for insufficient reasons and that if he didn’t do something about it quickly, certain gravitational conditions would delay the *Guntharben* far longer than the search would take, the Consul had already given his instructions and the necessary psychological training.

He went out to the *Guntharben* personally, an unprecedented happening, and after making a formal complaint to the Copan Field Police, he was driven out to the ship in his luxurious and unobtrusively armoured mobile, through the ring of Security Police surrounding the *Guntharben*.

He proceeded to play his part with distinction, angling Captain Mackenzie on his psychological line with unnoticed skill, but with tensed nerves, for convincing Mackenzie was the easier of his tasks; the Copans were undoubtedly listening in through a pick-up planted in the Control Bridge by the Security Police the previous day, and they must not suspect anything.

“You realise, of course, Captain,” he said, “that you have no legal right to object to the delay, for under reciprocal treaties, the Copans have every authority to do this.”

Captain Mackenzie looked annoyed.

“Well, anyway, have you any idea what they’re looking for?”

The Consul put on a carefully judged conspiratorial air. “Well,” he said softly, deliberately starting to look stealthily around the Bridge and catching himself with a self-conscious smile, “We’re not supposed to know this of course, but they think that there’s an Earthman hiding in your hold who’s on the run from the Security Police.”

“What’s he wanted for?” asked Baker, who had been a quiet spectator during the preliminary talking, but was interested now.

This was the moment. Gain their sympathy. Choose a Copan crime which would appear normal conduct to Earthmen; at least, the Consul qualified hastily, normal conduct to a certain type of Earthman.

“He accosted the mistress of one of the Controllers of Textiles Corporated in a drinking house, I think,” he said in a deliberately off-hand manner.

He saw the indignant awakening of the partisan spirit of Earth which seems to follow the Law of Inverse Squares as the light years to Terra increase, and he smiled inwardly.

After a few more minutes, he left, leaving a germinating seed of rebellion behind him in the *Guntharben*.

Once more the Earthman watched the twenty hour Copan day wear on towards noon.

At the base of the *Guntharben*, the Copans scuttled like ants around the flaring jet orifices; in a typically Copan manner they had circumvented some difficult constructional problems by making the suction loader simply a loader, and now they couldn’t unload the grain until they had dismantled the mechanism and altered it.

Captain Mackenzie relished the delay, for he had decided to blast off that night; he couldn’t know that the final stimulus to a half-made decision had been supplied artificially by the remaining Earth Security system via the Earth Consul.

Darkness came and still the unloading hadn’t started.

Delicate micro-millimetre controls were adjusted by steady hands and electrical forces fluxed in the humid atmosphere above Mek. A remotely controlled two-feet long rocket opened tiny ports around its nose and ejected incredibly fine particles at carefully chosen points. Controlled refraction began.

One of the cargo loaders saw it first. He began to run.

Baker, who was standing on the crew platform far up in the gathering dusk, noticed the running figure and a concerted movement through the men clustered round the base of the gantry as they turned to stare after the fleeing cargo loader. Then one of the tiny figures pointed at the sky and a scared shout drifted distantly up to Baker.

He looked in the direction of the pointing arm.

Perceptibly against the purplish sky there was a patch of darkness pushing out amoebic pseudopods with slow menace. Baker felt a shiver up his back. What was it?

He went into the airlock and closed the outer door. He waited for the safety circuit to complete itself, then opened the inner door.

“Come and have a look at this...”

Mackenzie and Soames, one of the crewmen, came into the airlock and went outside to the crew platform. By this time, the cloud had coalesced and withdrawn into a sharply defined mass which was so dark that it looked like a hole in the sky.

The superstitious cargo loaders were tiny specks heading away from the *Guntharben* and after trying to stop them, a hopeless task, the Security Police who had been specially trained to subjugate their

overriding superstitions watched the forming symbol for a few minutes; then they too began to move away, with a hint of haste in their rigid walks.

The Earthmen studied the symbol, something like the *Crux Anstata of Terra*, and the *Sign of Foreboding* in the principal Copan religion. Then Captain Mackenzie spun on his heel, a grim smile on his face.

“Come on, you two, here’s our chance to blastoff without burning a few Copans to death in our rocket flame,” he said over his shoulder, and Soames and Baker quickly followed him into the airlock. The outer door slammed to, and then there was only the featureless hull face of the *Guntharben* and five minutes after, a tiny glow of light showing redly around the rims of the jet orifices.

Sands opened his eyes and there was nothing but impenetrable darkness. He tried to move and realised with a sudden flood of terror that he was still trapped in the grain, that soon his oxygen would be exhausted, that soon he would never breath untainted air again, that he would never feel wind on his face and smell the particular scent of the Oxfordshire countryside that was duplicated nowhere else in the Galaxy. He fought the tide of oblivion that came sweeping in again to protect him from the realities which faced him, and concentrated on the faint sensory stimuli reaching him from the so-near outside. There was a barely noticeable vibration and then he felt rather than heard a clang echoing through the ship.

That was a mooring grapple releasing! he thought excitedly.

There was another clang... and another...

The vibration increased, and Sands knew that outside the insulating grain there was the monstrous roar of an operating drive belittling other noises to nothing.

In the Control Bridge Captain Mackenzie sat with fingers poised above the firing studs, his eyes fixed on the red needle showing Pump Pressure, watching it move steadily around the colour graduated scale.

In the secondary Control Point, Baker studied similar dials and watched studs depressing themselves and levers moving backwards and forwards in response to impulses from the identical controls operated in the other Control Point.

He said suddenly, “Hey, cap! This bloke down in the hold. If he’s buried under the grain, how the hell’s he going to breath?”

Captain Mackenzie kept his eyes rigidly on the instruments.

“Didn’t you notice that there was a spacesuit missing?” he said absently.

“Well, how’s he going to get out from under the grain, then?” said Baker in the manner of a man presenting an unsolvable problem.

“Don’t worry,” said Mackenzie mysteriously, “he’ll get out without any help from us...”

The moving pressure needle apparently disappeared as it reached the red part of the colour calibrations, and Mackenzie pushed down both hands in a mighty chord.

Sands tried to squirm to relieve the mighty drag of the economically high takeoff accelerations which Mackenzie was using, but he was still held in a straitjacket of grain. Without the sprung bunks and hydraulically cushioned, form-fitting chairs of the spaceship to help his body fight against the unnatural strains imposed upon it, his blood was dragged away from his head and his heart was unable to pump more up to replace it.

So Sands blacked out.

Captain Mackenzie released the firing studs and the thunder of the drive ceased; he floated gently away from the Control Point, twisting in the air to land on his feet on the bulkhead between the Control Bridge and the crew quarters, which had previously been the floor. Soames set the instruments which could check course to an incredible degree of accuracy in a mere quarter of an hour. Baker checked the instruments banked round the secondary Control Point, made a couple of minor adjustments, twisted his head to look at Mackenzie. "All correct, cap."

They relaxed, lying on soft cushions of air.

"What about our stowaway, cap?" said Baker.

"He'll be around soon," said Mackenzie. "Just flood the airlock with air to make sure we can hear him when he comes."

Baker pushed himself off, glided over to the airlock now in the floor or ceiling, depending on your viewpoint. He opened the inner door and there was a *whoosh* as the airlock filled up. Air was never left in the airlock because exposure to the single-thickness outer door of the lock conducted away its heat and so produced a temperature drop in the ship when the two air masses intermingled, on the opening of the inner door.

The radio operator came out of his cubicle and hovered in the exact centre of the Bridge, revolving very slowly on his longitudinal axis; presently the soft thumps of airtight doors closing showed that the other two crewmen were going down into the overdrive room. There was an air of expectancy in the Control Bridge, manifesting itself in the tense positions, and the irritatingly regular noise made as Soames thudded a fist into cupped palm, first the right hand into the left, then the left into the right to neutralise the slight spin which the navigator gave himself.

"Shut up, will you!" snapped Baker.

Soames stopped.

Sands floated amongst the millions of grains like a castaway in the Rings of Saturn. With the abrupt change from high acceleration to freefall, tightly compressed grains had sprung away from the lower portion of the hold and now occupied the entire cargo compartment. Sands switched on the torch on the right forearm of the suit and with the beam tightly focused, swung his arm in a wide arc.

All around him were the grains like miniature moons. He couldn't see the loading hatch; for that matter, neither could he see the hull, and he realised that he must have drifted away from it during his blackout. He moved his arm again and watched long lines of grains stretching away from him until the separate seeds became indistinguishable, winking into existence, it seemed, for the brief moment that his light rested upon them and then disappearing into the absolute darkness once more. He hung his arm down by his side and tilted his head back. Still the grains were just visible, illuminated by a reflection of the torch beam pointing in the precisely opposite direction.

Sands roused himself to action and switched on the lights round the base of his plastic hood; he read the oxygen hours left to him on the wafer thin, flexible indicator inset in the transparent material of the hood, just below his eye level. He remembered that the calculations were based on the oxygen already used and the time it had taken to use them. The hour and a half indicated was, then, only about an hour of active movements, since his elapsed time spent in the suit had been mostly inactive. Enough, though, to get to the crew lock, he estimated.

He altered the torch beam to diffused, unfocussed light, gathered a handful of grain in each hand,

threw them violently rearwards. He began to glide slowly forward, looking ahead of him, watching the grains swim slowly towards him and ricochet gently off the plastic skin around his head. Ridiculously, he found that it took a conscious effort of will to stop himself blinking involuntarily as they came towards his eyes.

The hull floated up towards him and he twisted slightly, thrust his arms out in front of him. Instead of hitting the plates directly he touched them at an angle and slowly bounced off. He hurled another handful of grain in a carefully judged direction and drifted in parallel to the hull this time, made contact without rebounding and moved along just touching it with his shoulder and his thigh.

After searching for five minutes, he found the cargo hatch, closed by automatic safety controls at the time of blastoff. He struggled with it, hooking the fingers of his left hand around one of the hinges while he pushed and strained at an obstinate catch.

Twice the flimsy hold his left hand was trying to maintain slipped and he sailed away from the hatch before he could regain it. Finally he pulled it open and eased himself through, holding firmly to the sides of the hatch. Outside, the stars were still points—the *Guntharben* was not yet in overdrive. He flattened himself against the hull and looked along it. First he picked out the black curve of the hull, then the direction of the nose.

He began to crawl along the metal, feeling through the insulation of his suit only a slight chill from the absolute-zero temperature of the hull plates. Occasionally he floated away from the hull and waited patiently until he made contact again. He changed the focus of the light back to the concentrated beam and stood gingerly to his feet. He directed the torch up the hull and watched the long, pale oval of light. There! That's the crew lock, he thought.

He knelt down again on the hull and put his right forearm on the plates in front of him, pointing the path of light along the hull.

When he reached the airlock, he banged thunderously upon it; slowly it swung open, controlled from the inside. A gush of pale air came out, covering him with rime as the moisture condensed on his suit.

Baker stepped away from the airlock controls and looked through the small hatch in the now-closed inner door.

When Sands floated into the Bridge, Baker pushed a sly finger in his ribs. "About time you got here," he said with a grin. "What was it like in the hold?"

Sands looked at him in amazement. "But how did you know where I was?" he asked.

Baker leered at him. "We got our spies everywhere, mate. And that's how we know the Copans are after you for trying to pick up some woman, you nasty old man!"

Sands was puzzled, because he was certain that nobody had watched him hide in the hold, but he didn't pursue the subject.

"Thanks for not giving me up," he said.

"Great Ghu," exclaimed Captain Mackenzie. "You don't think that we'd have left an Earthman to the Copan idea of justice, do you? Arresting a man for talking to a woman... I ask you!"

The course computer buzzed and extruded a punched strip of paper. Soames fed it into a slot at the secondary Control Point, and Baker floated over and studied the results on the instruments. He pushed some studs, and the *Guntharben* heaved slightly. Baker checked the instruments, turned to Mackenzie.

"On course, cap."

“Right.” Sands was forgotten as Mackenzie and his crew prepared for the jump into overdrive. Down below in the overdrive room, the other two crewmen began to gradually increase power through the unit and the crystalline feelers began to vibrate, creating an artificial condition in which multiple light speeds were possible.

The *Guntharben* slid smoothly into overdrive.

After steadily increasing velocity for thirteen hours, the apparent density of space reached a point at which it was unwise for the *Guntharben* to travel any faster. The hours and days wore on. After the inevitable questions had all been asked and Captain Mackenzie had decided to hand Sands over to Earth Security when the *Guntharben* arrived with her cargo of grain, Sands carefully opened the capsule and loaded the film into the ship’s microfilm projector. He switched it on and put his eyes to the eyepiece.

A densely packed sheet of ideographs, splattered with some intricately phrased equations, was projected on to the softly glowing screen. There were two lines of capitalised titling strip.

Sands began to laboriously translate it from his hypnotically impressed knowledge of the Copan language.

“A Method of...” Sands paused and tried to rid his mind of all unnecessary thoughts, attempting to achieve the ideal of a completely blank consciousness, allowing an easy path between the ideographs and the translations in his subconscious mind.

“per... pet... uating...” a pause...“ Life in...” Sands gulped. “Anthropoid Lifeforms...”

*A Method of perpetuating Life in Anthropoid Lifeforms!*

Sands switched off the projector and took out the film with the automatic actions and detachment of deep thought.

Immortality... that was what it amounted to.

Eternal Life. If anything could unite the Copan Corporations and bring them to a concerted action, the bait of immortality was that thing. A reward or a bribe, either way it would be equally effective.

Sands let his thoughts run farther afield. Suddenly he realised that he could practically ask his own reward for the secret when he made contact with the Terran Government through Earth Security.

He replaced the film in the capsule with almost ludicrous care.

The voice of Captain Mackenzie, booming through the *Guntharben*, came curiously deadened to Sands as he lay on the bunk in his sleeping cubicle, half asleep, letting his mind play with the thoughts of the pleasures and luxuries which might be his, dreaming of going back to Earth.

“Sands!” He roused himself and floated to the companionway leading to the Control Bridge. “Yes?” he called.

“Come up here!”

Sands pushed himself off and coasted slowly up the companionway, into the Bridge.

Mackenzie greeted him, “Don’t look now, but we’re being followed.”

He showed Sands the delicate instruments and the scope which indicated the presence of another operative overdrive within a quarter of a light year.

Sands eyed the scope with the blip almost motionless on the quarter of a light year concentric circle of the system centred on the *Guntharben*. “Who do you think it is?” he asked.

“The way I look at it,” said Mackenzie, “it can only be a Copan ship.”

“Why?” asked Sands.

“The blip is practically motionless, so that ship must be on almost exactly the same course as us and travelling practically the same speed. And the odds against that happening by chance would require a new system of mathematical notation to express, unless that ship,” Mackenzie nodded his head in the direction of the scope, “started from the same place as us at just about the same time.”

Sands pulled at an earlobe, thoughtfully.

“What can they do if they catch up with us?” he asked.

“Well, they can’t touch us until their overdrive sphere merges with ours, which would require some pretty accurate movement if we didn’t want it to...”

“What’s this about overdrive spheres?” asked Sands.

Mackenzie thought for a moment. “It’s difficult to explain, but that’s what the overdrive unit produces. It’s a sphere of hyperspace; inside the sphere we can exceed the speed of light, outside it there is normal space. That is why the Copans wouldn’t be able to touch us. The sphere’s a mathematical impossibility really, but as long as it works, why should I worry?”

“What’ll happen if they do merge spheres with us?”

“You’re the proper original quiz kid, aren’t you, mate?” said Baker.

Outside the *Guntharben*, the stars were varicoloured rings of light against purple space. The reflections on the polished metal of the hull looked like carelessly thrown hoopla rings. At a distance which could almost be measured sensibly in terrestrial miles, the other ship paralleled their course, invisible but detectable.

Mackenzie sat at the Control Point, strapped in, immobile but for the flicker of fingers like blades of steel and the quick movement of eyes. He was sweating with strain, changing the course of the *Guntharben* as randomly as he could; his fingers would hover over a set of studs, then shift to another set, then to another, before they finally dropped to the roughened plastic of the studs.

He brushed the drops of sweat from his forehead. “It’s no good,” he said tensely, “they’ve got some sort of psycho-computer in that blasted ship that predicts whatever I’m going to do.” He turned to the Secondary Control Point. “Have a try, Baker.”

For the first few erratic switches of course, the other ship was slow; the blip would shift fractionally from the centre of the bullseye of concentric circles on the scope and the men clinging to straps on the hull would breath audible sighs of relief.

Suddenly Captain Mackenzie looked at Sands. “They’re chasing you for something more than you’ve told us,” he said accusingly. Sands mutely shook his head.

For five hours the subtle manoeuvring continued. Inside the *Guntharben*, the controls were taken over by man after man, and each time the other ship would lose some ground at first, then quickly regain it, and more, as the psycho-computer detected an unconscious pattern in the moves which even the pilot himself was unaware existed.



The end was inevitable.

Outside, a segment of ship suddenly appeared, occulting the rings of the stars. It was the middle portion of the Copan ship, appearing through the circle of junction between the two overdrive spheres. The visible segment of Copan ship slowly grew, revealing the ugly streamlined bulges of weapon pods on her sides, with chill starlight shining on thick plastic ports and the phosphorescent, angular ideographs of her fleet designation glowing coldly.

The circle of junction suddenly dwindled as the distance between the ships increased, and the Copan ship disappeared in the time of a blink of an eye. Almost immediately it was back, entirely visible from the clustered tubes to the needle nose, visible because the ship was darker than the purple backdrop of space.

Inside the *Guntharben*, Sands stared into a viewplate, judging the approach of the other ship. He had on a spacesuit.

He turned to Mackenzie. "You're sure that there's nowhere for me to hide?" he asked.

"No... there's nowhere."

The *Guntharben* was slowly revolving on its axis; every ten seconds or so, the view of the Copan ship would shift to another screen, the image gradually becoming larger. There was a clang on the hull as a magnetic grapple touched, scraped around the turning ship, slowing its revolution. There was another clang, more scraping and rattling.

"Get a move on, Sands, they'll be coming aboard to look for you soon..."

Sands waited until the airlock of the *Guntharben* was beginning to move out of the view of the other ship, then opened the outer door of the lock a foot and squeezed out, the miniature rocket unit scraping against the lock rim. He hunched his shoulders as he floated away from the closing lock, letting the unit settle itself more comfortably on his back. The important thing, the really important thing, a real matter of life or death, was that he must not go near the limits of the overdrive sphere. Don't go near it, he told himself. Stay right near the ship.

For consider, if he went out of the sphere, he would be in normal space, stranded. And without instantaneous radio and without a more specific knowledge of his position, even than within a million miles, he could drift for the rest of time without being found. And he couldn't wait that long.

How many ships had been lost through elapsed millenia? Once an alien ship had been found, drifting into Sirius System. An empty shell of metal, grained and carved out like a log canoe, with nothing inside it, no engines, no propulsion tubes, no airlocks. An enigma.

How many human ships, lost in normal space between the stars by the failure of their overdrive units, would be found ages in the future... to puzzle their finders?

So mused Sands as he watched magnetic grapples floating towards the *Guntharben*, slowing her revolution and drawing the two ships closer together. He grasped his automatic tightly, knowing that if he dropped it, the gun would not fall or drift away, yet not liking to risk relaxing his grip.

Incredibly, he realised that this was the first time he had floated in space with nothing in comfortable reach, nothing to touch and feel, nothing to keep him in touch with humanity. He began to fall. His brain told him that rationally he wasn't, yet insisted that he was. He felt nauseated and heartburn gurgled in his throat.

As suddenly as it had begun, the feeling of falling stopped, yet the nausea remained. Through a haze

of sickness, he watched tiny tails of flame rush towards the *Guntharben*, swing round, slow down, blink out. A comforting, warm square of yellow light shone as the outer door of the airlock opened and one, two, three figures were silhouetted against it for a moment before they went inside. The square of light diminished to an oblong, a slit, a hair line.

Sands was alone, cut off from humanity except for a featureless, star-reflecting hull.

Immediately after Sands had gone outside to wait for the Copans to search the *Guntharben* for him and the secret he carried next to his skin, Mackenzie gathered together the crewmen in the Control Bridge.

“Look here,” he said. “It’s obvious that Sands has done something more than accost a girl if the Copans are going to these lengths to get hold of him. And if he isn’t willing to confide in me, I don’t think that I, or you, are under any obligation to protect him. Don’t give him away, don’t help the Copans, unnecessarily, but don’t delay them.”

“It looks to me, cap, that you’re running out on him,” said Baker.

Mackenzie looked obstinate, the strains of the last few hours were apparent in his demeanour.

“I don’t want to start any interstellar complications,” he said defensively.

“Don’t give us that, cap,” said Soames. “You’re scared.”

“Look here,” repeated Mackenzie, his brows lowering, “this is my blasted ship, and I don’t want it impounded or blown out of space for the sake of one Terran who seems a pretty shifty character, anyway.”

He glared round at the crewmen.

There was a bang at the airlock.

“Open it, Baker,” said Mackenzie.

“No.”

The hostility was very apparent.

Mackenzie pushed himself off, floated to the airlock, opened it.

Three Copans floated into the *Guntharben*, fanned out just inside the airlock. Captain Mackenzie pushed a button, a light glowed red, the inner door swung closed. A voice crackled out from a speaker set in the helmet of a Copan with the Security Police emblem blazoned on his chest piece; his face was invisible behind a one-way vision filter.

“You will pliz push into centre of room.” The inflections of his voice were subtly different, alien. The crewmen looked at each other, pushed off from the hull lining, judging the impetus to leave them floating within reach of a hand hold.

“You will pliz come nearer.”

Finally the crewmen were skilfully manoeuvred until they were floating helplessly in the middle of the Control Bridge. One Copan turned to Mackenzie while the other two drew weapons and faced the crewmen with watchfulness evident in the positions of their bodies.

“Capteen, you will pliz tell me where the man Sands is hidden.” The Copan raised his metal gloved

hand suggestively.

Mackenzie literally cowered. "I don't know," he spluttered, "Really I don't."

"I never thought he was yellow-bellied," said Baker to Soames.

Soames shrugged. "You can't tell, can you?"

The Copan smashed Mackenzie in the face. The sound of the metal glove striking against flesh was unpleasant. Mackenzie put his hands to his face and blood trickled between his fingers.

"We will not waste time."

Mackenzie whimpered. He took his hands briefly away from his face.

"I don't know where he is, I tell you!" he screamed. His mouth was a dark hole in a mask of blood.

After the fifth blow, one of the overdrive techs of the *Guntharben* took a spanner from his pocket and threw it. As it left his hand one of the Copans triggered his weapon. The granular bullet struck the tech on his chest and stomach and killed him instantly.

There was a murmur from the other three men. Then Baker cursed. Soames said quickly "Shut up. We'll wait until the iron's hot before we..." He left the last word of the old proverb unsaid. The other overdrive tech glanced at him quickly. Baker did not look at Soames or the body lying flacidly against the hull where the impact of the bullet had pushed it; instead he stared stolidly ahead, watching the rise and fall of the Copan Security man's arm.

Finally Mackenzie broke.

"He's Outside."

One Copan stayed in the *Guntharben* to keep Baker, Soames and the other crewman out of action, and the other two Security Police went out of the airlock.

Humanity is spread throughout the Galaxy in a million different but similar forms. Some have tentacular limbs, trinocular optical systems, furry bodies. Some live in symbiosis with a curious variety of life forms. All have adapted themselves to the conditions on their native worlds.

And despite the immense variety of physical variations on the basic anthropoid lifeform, all humanity have one thing in common.

The immense variety of humanity is not only confined to physical differences; it extends to mentality as well. Some have thoughts as vital as leaping fish, others have thoughts with the inexorability of falling rain. The humanity of Terra once were adventurous; once the spirit of Earth was like a patch of oil on still water, spreading in a whirl of scintillating colour. But now peace had thrown a veil over the planet, life went on in an uneventfully slow placing of one foot in front of the other. Ponderously? Spiritlessly? Time would tell.

No more did Earthman spread across the Galaxy in their swarming thousands; gradually the starmen were dying out. Occasionally a dissatisfied sect would pull up its roots and go from Earth to colonise a planet where a one-sided, unbalanced civilisation would gradually mature to a true democracy. There were still some freelance traders plying between the stars, supplying a rapidly disappearing need for strangeness and novelty. There were still throw-backs like Sands... but very few. And there were still the members of Earth Intelligence, sacrificing their heritage of peace for the good of their Home.

But for all the difference between, for instance, the stolid, withdrawn civilisation of Earth, and the

surging Lezaun Matriarchy, there is still a basic similarity.

Humanity, whatever its form, whatever its environment, whatever its background, humanity is not infallible. Man will always make mistakes.

Which was why the entire potentialities of Copa, spearheaded by the solitary Copan aboard the *Guntharben*, could not keep the crew of the *Guntharben* out of the struggle for possession of Sands and the secret he held.

Baker, Soames and the overdrive tech floated helplessly in the centre of the Control Bridge. The blank helmet of the Copan moved slowly, like the hood of a snake. It was disconcerting to be unable to read the expression on his face, to watch the direction of his eyes, to wait for the inevitable moment when his attention would wander, and the crewmen, by pushing against each other, would perhaps be able to close with him.

The crewmen had already forgotten that they were in the wrong, that they were actually aiding a lawbreaker. All the hostility against alien races which these neurotic starmen held inside them was finding an outlet in this battle between the underdog and Law, the law of another race.

“The Terran Space Navy will have sumthin’ narsty to say about this,” shouted Baker at the expressionless, unrevealing helmet.

The radio operator, who had been sleeping, forgotten by the remainder of the crew, in his cubicle, woke up. The unnatural stillness of the starship seemed curious to him, and he tried to remember what had awakened him. Wasn’t it a voice?

He slid off his bunk and floated out to the companion way, looked up it. He could see a leg which he recognised as Baker’s visible through the companion way, floating in the middle of the Bridge, motionless. The radio operator pushed off and slid through the air, the steps floating past beneath him, unused, unwanted until the *Guntharben* made planetfall again. Some innate sense of caution restrained him at the entrance to the Bridge and he looked cautiously around the lintel. The situation was self-evident. The radioman withdrew his head, returned to his sleeping cubicle, began to hunt for a weapon.

He found it, a souvenir sacrificial knife of the pattern used by the priests of Tabor, fourth planet of Arcturus. A close examination would have revealed a microscopic “Made in Birmingham” on the hilt. But for all that, the weapon had a keen edge to sheer through the rubber and metal fabric of a spacesuit... and the flesh and bone beneath it.

He returned to the companion way, floated up it, resumed his watch at the entrance to the Control Bridge. The helmet which the Copan wore obscured his view and the man was obviously applying one of the basic tenets of humanity... What I cannot see, is not.

The mouth of the radio operator tightened, he pushed himself off from the head of the companion way and floated slowly across the Bridge towards the Copan mercenary, the knife glinting.

Baker saw him and frantically began to talk, saying anything, studying the Copan frantically, trying to gain from the expressionless helmet some assurance that he was attracting the man’s attention.

“You don’t think that you’re goin’ to get away with this, do you?” he said, his voice conveying the emotion which the banality of his speech would never express. “Why, that flea pit Copa ’ll get blown out of space if you don’t get that battlewagon of yours out of it.”

The radio operator had ten feet to go.

The Copan spoke. "You broke our laws."

The radio operator glided on silently.

The knife flashed in a vicious arc, and the blade entered the Copan at the base of his neck and cut his jugular vein. He kicked for a moment, and when the radio man withdrew the knife, globules of blood emerged slowly from the slit and broke away like soap bubbles.

The radio operator saw Captain Mackenzie floating unconscious near the airlock door, his face covered with dried, blackened blood, his nose flattened, one eye closed. He began to go over to him. Baker caught his arm.

"Leave him alone," he said softly.

The mouth of the radio operator opened.

"What?" he said incredulously.

Baker's lips twisted angrily. "Leave the yellow-bellied swab alone!" he shouted, the metal of the starship ringing to his voice.

Mackenzie moaned, very softly, and little flecks of blood came from his lips. Painfully he moved an arm and caught hold of a strap on the inner wall of the hull.

Baker began to speak with a new authority and urgency in his tone. The atmosphere of flippancy and shallowness which had always surrounded the little man disappeared.

"Look," he said, "It don't matter why we're helpin' Sands. Perhaps he is in the wrong, perhaps he has done something more than what he's told us. It still don't make any difference to the fact that he's Terran, like us, and that these other swine are aliens."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"But what the hell can we do to rescue him?"

Soames creased his forehead in thought. "It seems to me," he said haltingly, "that if they just wanted him dead, the Copans could have blown this can out of space, made sure of killing him, and nobody would have been any the wiser. They'd have just said our overdrive must have failed."

"Which means, then," said the radioman, "that if they haven't caught him yet, Sands is still out there," he nodded his head towards the airlock, "and he'll be alive still."

"That's how I see it," said Soames.

"Then there's only one thing to do," said Baker. "Let's get into our suits." He pushed off towards the airlock. "Wait," husked Mackenzie through cracked lips. He pushed off from the hull. "Listen to me. I've got a better plan."

"Why should we listen to you?" said Baker bitterly.

"I'm a coward," replied Mackenzie. "I always have been, I suppose. And I've let Sands down. Can't you at least give me a chance to try and get him out of this mess?"

The crewmen looked at each other, then back to the battered man, appealing silently with his eyes.

Sands was sweating inside his suit, the drops starting out on his forehead and trickling into his eyes as he moved his head. His armpits were wet, and the palms of his hands were clammy. He tried to rub them

down his thighs and felt a sudden, petty outburst of anger, when he could not because he was wearing a suit.

The stars were like the pale faces which look up from the auditorium of a theatre, amused by the actor's antics but unaffected by them. Sands felt alone. Suddenly he could not wait any longer for the Copans to catch him, he had to do something positive. He gave the impeller stud a little blip and drifted forward beside the dark metal of the fin he was hiding behind. On his left he knew, was the surface of the overdrive sphere, invisible but certain death to penetrate. On his right was the *Guntharben* and beyond that, the Copan ship, like monstrous whales in a goldfish bowl, with five deadly minnows hunting for him. The shining blue of the metal fin slid by him. It ended in a sharp edge and Sands cartwheeled in space with an incredible, airy ease which he could never hope to repeat in a gymnasium. For a brief moment he was back in primary school with the voice of his gym. teacher, not angry but patient. He could have understood anger, he knew, but not that patient voice saying, "Try it again, Christopher," when it was obvious that he would never be able to do it with the grace of his friends. What does it matter, anyway? he had asked, and now, he realised that he knew the answer; that his failure in as little a thing as cartwheels had laid the foundation to the feeling of inferiority that had driven him out into space, to the stars, and that his teacher had known it.

Christopher. Laura had been the last person to call him that. Never Chris, but always Christopher, in that soft, lovely voice of hers.

Back to the present; back to the here-and-now; keep away from that subject. No Trespassing, not in those memories.

He touched the impeller stud again and stopped himself, spinning slowly round and round. The stars revolved solemnly before his eyes. He saw a tiny red candle flame and knew what it was. The torch beam centred on him and the moment was here. Behind that light was a Copan, as isolated from his companions as Sands was. Sands was not afraid, the petty anger had left him, he felt detached from his body. His mind coldly calculated angles and vectors, hefted the weight of the automatic in his hand, ordered his body to move it in such-and-such a way, point it in such-and-such a direction. He squeezed the trigger, there was a splash of flame, the gun kicked in his hand.

The candle flame streaming from the back of the Copan was snuffed out, only a vague red glow was left, shining on the tiny figure of the Copan, illuminating the arms and legs; jerking like a puppet's.

The man sailed serenely on. Sands watched dispassionately as the Copan approached the limits of the overdrive sphere. Suddenly the kicking figure disappeared, was gone into normal space, to struggle until the air supply was exhausted. It would die; the spirit would leave the bodily husk to drift forever between the stars.

Sands drove himself back behind the protecting fin of the *Guntharben* and stopped there, waiting. That leaves four, he thought, melodramatically.

Captain Mackenzie and Baker climbed into spacesuits in the airlock. They switched out the airlock lights and stood in the darkness to let their eyes adjust to the difference between the brightly lighted Control Bridge and the blackness of space. Mackenzie had been roughly patched up with artificial skins and pain killers. In his hand he held the weapon which the knifed Copan had used; in a belt he had thrust an iron bar. Baker had a signal gun.

Baker rapped on the inner door and Soames operated the airlock controls. The outer door swung open and the two men slipped through the still opening gap and floated out of the lock to make the number of players in the macabre game of hide-and-seek up to seven. The outer door closed behind them.

Mackenzie studied the sinister shape of the Copan ship and kicked off from the hull of the *Guntharben* in a carefully judged course he hoped would bring him to his destination without using his rocket unit and so giving away his position. He sailed off into space and Baker watched him go with a curious, resigned expression on his face, as if he had tried to talk Mackenzie out of some action, and had failed.

The white spot of a torch beam appeared on the hull beside Baker and moved towards him. Baker avoided it.

He waited, listening to the ticking of his watch conducted by the air in his suit. After what he reckoned to be about three minutes had passed, there was a slit of light showing against the hull of the Copan ship. It was the first visible indication that Mackenzie had successfully reached the other starship and carried out the primary section of his plan. It was also the signal for Baker to begin to look for Sands. Where would a hunted man hide? he asked himself. Where *could* a hunted man hide in the overdrive sphere? He wasn't in the *Guntharben* and no man would push his head into the lion's mouth by going into the Copan ship. So he was still Outside.

Baker took a firmer grasp of the signal gun and kicked off towards the shelter of the fins of the *Guntharben*. He sailed towards one and hooked his arm round the leading edge of it, wrenching the muscles of his shoulder and biceps as the force of his momentum was suddenly transferred to them. He slid into the shelter of the fin and released the trigger of the signal gun, already set to a muzzle velocity of a metre per second. The fuse of the flare was set to a minute. In sixty seconds, then, the flare would bathe every unprotected object in the overdrive sphere with icy white light.

Captain Mackenzie floated down a long white corridor in the alien starship. It was quiet, absolutely quiet. Mackenzie was shaking with fright; a tiny hosepipe was gushing inside his mouth. He was fighting the fear which had always been with him, all his life. He was hating himself for the cowardice he had shown. Every few years, just when he thought he had the bane of his life conquered, his fear of physical violence would overcome him. In a few hours, if his plan worked, the fear would never bother him again. He held the weapon in his hand tighter, and touched the iron bar in his belt with the other hand. There was almost certainly another Copan in the ship and that was the first obstacle he would have to surmount, with his fear clinging to his back like the Old Man of the Sea.

He reached a bulkhead with an airtight door set in it. Mackenzie arrived against it with a soft thump and pressed his helmet against the smooth, cool metal, listening by conduction. There were the noises of machinery but none of humanity. There was a semicircular slot in the door with a knob projecting from one end of the slot. The Earthman took hold of it gingerly and pulled it. The knob slid easily and followed the slot round. When it reached the other end of the slot, there was a click and a whirl. The door started to swing slowly open.

Mackenzie kicked off from the wall of the corridor and slid through the opening in the bulkhead. Inside the door there was confusion to the eyes of the Earthman for the first few moments, until the details began to sort themselves out. The strange, alien distributions of controls... and the Copan moving quickly to a desk and pulling open a drawer. Mackenzie pointed his weapon and pushed the stud in the butt. There was a whistling bang and the disintegrating granular bullet caught the Copan and hurled him back against a bank of winking lights. There was a popping of vacuum tubes.

The body twitched and Mackenzie hurled himself at it. He began to beat at it with his iron bar, wedging himself against a chair, smashing, smashing, smashing, until the body was a limp rag of flesh and splintered bone. The man was screaming hysterically.

Finally Mackenzie stopped, looked at his splattered clothes. He was violently sick, inside his helmet.

After a few minutes, he recovered control, set his mouth determinedly, went to another airtight door leading out of the control room. He was searching for the overdrive room, and the overdrive unit which the Copan ship must have. All the time, he was looking around nervously; his hands were shaking and twitching as he fumbled at the door.

Mackenzie floated into a long, cylindrical chamber. The door, a six-inch slab of silvery alloy, swung closed behind him with a soft thump of airtight joints.

The chamber was illuminated with a soft yellow light emanating from the crystalline hammer-head crystals laying against the hull, vibrating on the unimaginable frequencies which produced the overdrive sphere and the frequencies which produced visible light.

Delicately spun wires and metallic tubes shivered with tiny voices and sung with power. Mackenzie drifted among the fairy-like machinery, gripping his iron bar with shaking, sweating hands, thoughts whirling inside his head like frightened squirrels running up their treadmill, getting nowhere but still running on.

*Coward*, the voices of the tiny tubes seemed to say. *You're afraid, afraid, afraid*, murmured and sung the finely drawn wires.

Mackenzie tentatively touched at a tube with his iron bar, thinking. "I'm not afraid!" he shouted, and listened to the mocking voices of the overdrive.

The flare burst, throwing out flaming fragments. It looked like Sol at the orbit of Mars, only it was white, a blazing white ball. Baker realised that he was illuminated in its glare and he reached frantically over his shoulder to use his rocket unit. His finger was on the impeller stud when there was a red flash about ten yards away.

The blinding light turned the hull of the *Guntharben* to silver, threw sharp shadows across the metal. Sands gasped inside his suit, wondering, waiting for the light to die away, trying to decide what was producing the sudden illumination.

He suddenly saw the figure hanging near him in space and levelled his automatic and fired in one continuous motion. A moment later, he realised that he had shot Baker.

The hole in Baker's suit sealed itself in a few seconds. Baker hung there, writhing, feeling a red-hot iron pushing itself slowly into his guts, angry pain forcing him to scream until his stomach seemed to rush up into his throat and choke him. He clasped his hands uselessly over his stomach for a moment, then took them away; he could feel his abdomen thrusting itself out against his suit.

He made himself move forward, his brain telling him coldly that he was going to die, his spirit making him go on and complete the plan which Mackenzie had worked out. He took Sands by the upper arm, turned round and jetted towards the airlock. He banged once on the outside metal, even as the flare of their rocket units turned the airlock door red with the braking energies. The airlock swung open and the two men were inside. The inside door was opened when the pressure of the lock was only half that of the ship and there was a great whoosh as the pressure was equalised. Sands pulled Baker inside and stripped his suit off. The little man lay on the air and the expression on his face was not nice to look upon. Soames went for the emergency medical pack although he already knew with a sickening certainty that it was too late.

There were unashamed tears on Sands' cheeks. He wiped them away, looked up at Soames and the overdrive technician. "Let's get on with it," he said harshly, trying to disguise his emotion but seeing it reflected in the faces of the other two men. He looked around the Control Bridge, saw the body of the other overdrive tech, the corpse of the Copan. "Where's Mackenzie?"



Soames looked soberly at Sands. "Mackenzie had an idea. He's gone over to the Copan ship to smash their overdrive, if he can, and Baker went out to bring you back aboard."

Sands said, "Why?"

"Don't you see, you fool. The Copans will either be left in normal space or out there," Soames gestured Outside, "and they'll just stay there till their oxygen's exhausted."

"When's Mackenzie coming back to the *Guntharben*, then?"

"He isn't. And, Sands, do you really think that you're worth all the lives that have been thrown away for you?"

Silence fell in the *Guntharben* as the three men watched the scope and the double blip on it which indicated the *Guntharben* and the alien starship. Sands mulled over the bitter, angry words which Soames had flung at him.

After a couple of minutes, the blip on the scope suddenly dwindled to a single blip and the three men knew that Mackenzie had smashed the overdrive mechanism of the other ship and plunged it, with himself aboard, into the unplotted gray of interstellar space.

An hour passed, and then the first bangs on the airlock began, and the first pitiful scrabblings on the outside skin of the *Guntharben*. Soames and the tech thought of Baker, who had finally found himself and had been killed by the man he was trying to save, and Mackenzie, who had shown his cowardice but finally overcome it, and LeFleuve, the dead overdrive tech, and they set their faces implacably and did not open the lock. Sands thought of the secret he had, and he did not open the lock, either.

For twenty more hours the noises continued at irregular moments, gradually becoming weaker; finally they stopped.

For three more days the *Guntharben* cut through hyperspace like a shining spear enclosed in a soap bubble. On the second day, Soames went out in a spacesuit, with the bodies of Baker and LeFleuve and gave them a push which gradually took them out of the sphere and into normal space. He did not look at the four bodies with protruding tongues which orbited the ship like miniature moons.

After the three days, the course computers automatically took the *Guntharben* into normal space, within primary drive distance of Earth. Soames set course for Home and a day out, he called aboard a pilot. The pilot arrived in the uniform of Earth Intelligence and aboard an Earth Intelligence cruiser. He came aboard the *Guntharben* with an escort and the interstellar trading ship was piloted directly to Earth Intelligence Satellite, rolling around in its orbit beyond the moon.

There, the *Guntharben* was taken apart and put together again with all the marks of the struggle with the Copan ship erased and some convincing damage, indicative of an accident, substituted. The minds of Soames and the overdrive tech were cleared of all memories of Sands and the battle in hyperspace and in the place of those memories were put convincing remembrances of an accident in space, which neatly explained the deaths of Mackenzie, Baker and LeFleuve. The *Guntharben* was sold to a breaker's yard, Soames and the tech were paid off from the money for the ship and cargo and the remainder of the proceeds went to an unsuspected wife of Mackenzie.

Sands was forgotten, completely.

Sands studied his image, narrowed and saturnine, in the mirror-surface of the sphere in which he found himself. He moved his head to look around him and the slight movement caused his body to float away from the concave, cool surface of the metal. He looked at his body and realised that he was nude.

And he also realised that he had just regained consciousness. Only the hiatus that he sensed lay between his previous thoughts and his present ones gave him this information, because there was no interruption, no gap of troubled dreams, no sense of muzziness and that just-woken-up feeling. His thoughts had gone smoothly on; one moment he was going into the airlock of the satellite disc with Soames and the other crewman, the next moment he had been looking down at a distorted image of himself.

The sphere was about fifteen feet across, a bubble of opaque metal inside which he was trapped. There was no gravity, the light flooding the globe was sourceless, no mark marred the polished surface of the metal, there were no pipes to supply air. There was nothing in there but Sands, and he was nude. He looked at himself and realised that he was clean, as well; incredibly clean. Not merely hot-bath-and-scrub, but sterilised cleanliness. His toe and finger nails looked like thin white paper, and his hair was fluffing round his head like a halo. He was not hungry, he was not thirsty, he did not feel sleepy, and somehow he knew that whilst he was in the sphere, no human needs would bother him. There was a voice, echoless, sexless, clear as a bell. "Sands."

"Yes?" he answered ridiculously, for the voice had not called, it had merely stated.

"We have taken the information for which seventeen men died."

Sands pretended a confidence he did not feel. Although it was as if all emotion had been sucked, out of him, he still felt a deep dread. "I'm going to charge you five million pounds for it, and even counting the lives that it's cost, it's still cheap at the price!"

"Would you, Sands, buy a secret which you had already, and had owned for nine hundred years?"

It took a moment or two for the words to sink in. Then, "You've got the secret of immortality?" asked Sands, incredulously. Reason quickly reasserted itself. "You can't have. You're lying. You want me to reduce the price." But that was ridiculous. He was at the mercy of Earth Security. They didn't have to pay him anything if they didn't want to. No, they couldn't have the secret... no! Why, if they did have it, there would be no money, and if there was no money, there would be no life of ease, no women surrounding him to make him forget Laura and his related hatred of the Earth Government, and to overcome his phobia against returning to his birthplace, to Earth. Sands struck furiously at the implacable metal with his open hand and floated away into the centre of the sphere, screaming, not even gaining the satisfaction of cauterising pain from the bruised and broken fingers of his hand. He thought cunning thoughts, he spoke softly to the enclosing walls, hoping to trick them.

"But if you have immortality, why don't you give it to the people of Earth?" Ah, you've got them there, Sands. They can't answer that.

The voice in the walls sounded again, reflectively. "I can answer that, Sands, if you really want to know.

"The reason is Evolution. That's why we haven't given everlasting life to the people of Earth. Evolution does not allow immortality. It drove Man from the comfort of his primitive fires; it drove him out into Space, to explore the planets of his own solar system, and, eventually, the planets of other stars, and then, in the fullness of time, it brought him back to his birthplace; Earth. When Man left the stars to the younger races, it wasn't because he had grown tired, or old and senile. It was because Evolution had channeled the spirit of the human race into introspection... looking inward to solve more important problems.

"The human race is growing up, Sands. We have finished playing marbles with the stars, and empire building in the Galaxy; we've come back Home to conquer ourselves.

"And this is why immortality is bad. If the human race became immortal, the expanding numbers of

men would force us to take a step back down the ladder of evolution, our own prolific breeding would make us colonies out among the stars again until Evolution overcame the Immortality drug and made us mortal once more. We don't want to juggle with solar systems anymore, Sands, so we don't use the Immortality treatment.

"We could restrict our birthrate, I suppose, and stagnate in an unchanging civilisation, but that would hold up Evolution even more. Man is born to die, and that's all there is to it. So we don't let any knowledge of the possibility of eternal life get in to Earth. Once in every century or so, the secret is rediscovered, down there, but each time the discoverer has seen the dangers in his discovery, and handed it over to Earth Intelligence. That, in itself, shows that men are growing up."

"So you daren't let the discovery get out," jeered Sands. "You couldn't trust the so-human race with it."

"No," replied the voice, soberly. "We don't dare. In every race there are men who never grow up properly. And they are the men who would accept eternal life. They would live on for centuries, mating, perpetuating their ataviatic blood among the human race. That sort of man is necessary in his own time to balance civilisation, but he shouldn't live on past it."

Sands felt futile, there were questions rolling inside his head, struggling to get out, but he couldn't express them.

"Look at yourself, Sands," the implacable voice went on. "You're human. I've looked at your record to see what kind of man we had to deal with. And what do I find?"

"When you were twenty years old, you fell in love. Her name was Laura Evans. There was a brief romance, presumably you were going to marry. But she disappeared. What do you do? You look for her frantically, can't find her. Finally you consider the matter rationally, ask the Government to help you trace her. They refuse, and you let your petty hatred of the Government develop into an obsession which drives you out into space. Then, instead of going to a psychologist and having treatment, you let your illness of the mind develop until you can't even set foot on Earth again. There's nothing that can be done for you now. Do you think that you're fit for immortality, fit to spread your instability throughout the race for the rest of time?" The clear voice held anger, now.

"Where did Laura go?" asked Sands. "You know. You must know."

"What she did involves one of the greatest sacrifices that a human can be called on to make. She became a member of Earth Intelligence, and accepted immortality."

"So you think that she was better than me?" said Sands dully.

"She was one of the finest women I have ever known."

"And is eternal life such a great sacrifice to make?" he said bitterly.

"It is for us. After we have passed the normal length of time that a human remains viable, we're sterilised to prevent any interference with the heredity and evolution of the human race."

"But why did she join Earth Intelligence. She loved me, I know she did."

"She could see that there are bigger things than personal love. Only a few people can do what she did. She became an extraterrestrial agent, and to pass as a member of an alien race involves some of the most intensive treatment ever evolved. First the body is altered until it actually is that of an alien. Then the mind is altered until you think like an alien, too. Nothing less than this will pass. You're transferred to the planet you've been intended for and you may spend centuries there, getting up every morning and seeing

your alien body in your mirror, thinking with inhuman thought processes, mixing with aliens who are exactly like you.

“Years ago, a man said something I’ve always thought exactly applicable to this case. He said, roughly... I can’t remember his actual words... *If an object is exactly similar to another object, it is that object.*

“If you have a human being exactly like an alien, he or she will become that alien. It takes a very exceptional quality of mind to remain true to humanity under those conditions, and Laura Evans was one of those very exceptional people.”

Sands just lay there in the middle of the sphere, letting the knowledge soak into him with a melancholy finality in his mind. He felt mentally cleansed, purified. The tangles of thought were cleared away at last. He knew what his destiny was... to ask for immortality, and sterility to keep his memory true, and to roam the galaxy looking for the woman he had loved, and still did, he knew. She was out there somewhere, immortal, waiting for him.

The glittering hypodermic reached out towards him on its long metal arm and he waited for it with an exultation in his mind. The needle pierced his skin and the sharp, bitter-sweet pain began, spreading over his body with an all pervading, excruciating tingling. Here was eternal life; here was destiny.

The clear voice sounded again, contemptuously, but Sands was safe behind his shield of self knowledge. He realised now, beyond all shadow of doubt, that he knew himself; the final meaning of his existence was clear. His shield of destiny was impregnable.

“Sands. There is something you should know. Laura Evans is dead. You were there when she died, on Copa, in the city of Mek. Her name there was Flexa.”

The carefully poised pyramid of self-sufficiency which was the mind of Sands collapsed in tumbling ruin as if somebody had kicked away the base. He saw the endless vistas of his life, stretching out before him, a corridor of infinity, peopled with mortal men, friends who would rot and die whilst he lived on, strange suns and the planets of the universe, the marvellous future of man which he could witness... but without Laura; she would be his face in the misty light, inviting, floating before him always, but unobtainable.

Consciousness went.

**The End.**

### **Notes and proofing history**

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