

This Earth of Hours

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THE ADVANCE squadron was coming into line as Master Sergeant Oberholzer came onto the bridge of the Novae Washingtongrad, saluted, and stood stiffly to the left of Lieutenant Campion, the exec, to wait for orders. The bridge was crowded and crackling with tension, but after twenty years in the Marines it was all old stuff to Oberholzer. The Hobo (as most of the enlisted men called her, out of earshot of the brass) was at the point of the formation, as befitted a virtually indestructible battleship already surfeited with these petty conquests. The rest of the cone was sweeping on ahead, in the swift enveloping maneuver which had reduced so many previous planets before they had been able to understand what was happening to them.

This time, the planet at the focus of all those shifting conic sections of raw naval power was a place called Calle. It was showing now on a screen that Oberholzer could see, turning as placidly as any planet turned when you were too far

away from it to see what guns it might be pointing at you.

Lieutenant Champion was watching it too, though he had to look out of the very corners of his eyes to see it at all.

If the exec were caught watching the screen instead of the meter board assigned to him, Captain Hammer would probably reduce him to an ensign. Nevertheless, Champion never took his eyes off the image of Calle. This one was going to be rough.

Captain Hammer was watching, too. After a moment he said, "Sound!" in a voice like sandpaper.

"By the pulse six, sir," Lieutenant Spring's voice murmured from the direction of the 'scope. His junior, a very raw youngster named Rover, passed him a chit from the plotting table. "For that read: By the birefs five eight nine, sir," the invisible navigator corrected.

Oberholzer listened without moving while Captain Hammer muttered under his breath to Flo-Mar 12-Upjohn, the only civilian allowed on the bridge and small wonder, since he was the Consort of State of the Matriarchy itself. Hammer had long ago become accustomed enough to his own bridge to be able to control who overheard him, but 12-Upjohn's answering whisper must have been audible to every man there.

"The briefing said nothing about a second inhabited planet," the Consort said, a little peevishly. "But then there's very little we do know about this system that's

part of our trouble. What makes you think it's a colony?"

"A colony from Calle, not one of ours," Hammer said, in more or less normal tones; evidently he had decided against trying to keep only half of the discussion private.

"The electromagnetic 'noise' from both planets has the same spectrum the energy level, the output, is higher on Calle, that's all. That means similar machines being used in similar ways. And let me point out, Your Excellency, that the outer planet is in opposition to Calle now, which will put it precisely in our rear if we complete this maneuver."

"When we complete this maneuver," 12-Upjohn said firmly. "Is there any evidence of communication between the two planets?"

Hammer frowned. "No," he admitted.

"Then we'll regard the colonization hypothesis as unproved and stand ready to strike back hard if events prove us wrong. I think we have a sufficient force here to reduce three planets like Calle if we're driven to that pitch."

Hammer grunted and resigned the argument. Of course it was quite possible that 12-Upjohn was right; he did not lack for experience in fact, he wore the Silver Barring, as the most-traveled Consort of State ever to ride the Standing Wave. Nevertheless Oberholzer repressed a sniff with difficulty. Like all the military, he was a colonial; he had never seen the Earth, and never expected to; and, both as a colonial

and as a Marine who had been fighting the Matriarchy's battles all his adult life, he was more than a little contemptuous of Earthmen, with their tandem names and all that they implied. Of course it was not the Consort of State's fault that he had been born on Earth, and so had been named only Marvin 12 out of the misfortune of being a male; nor that he had married into Florence Upjohn's cabinet, that being the only way one could become a cabinet member, and Marvin 12 having been taught from birth to believe such a post the highest honor a man might covet. All the same, neither 12-Upjohn nor his entourage of drones filled Oberholzer with confidence.

Nobody, however, had asked M. Sgt. Richard Oberholzer what he thought, and nobody was likely to. As the chief of all the non-Navy enlisted personnel on board the Hobo, he was expected to be on the bridge when matters were ripening toward criticality; but his duty there was to listen, not to proffer advice. He could not in fact remember any occasion when an officer had asked his opinion, though he had received and executed his fair share of near-suicidal orders from bridges long demolished.

"By the pulse five point five," Lieutenant Spring's voice sang.

"Sergeant Oberholzer," Hammer said.

"Aye, sir."

"We are proceeding as per orders. You may now brief

your men and put them into full battle gear."

Oberholzer saluted and went below. There was little enough he could tell the squad as 12-Upjohn had said, Calle's system was nearly unknown but even that little would improve the total ignorance in which they had been kept till now. Luckily, they were not much given to asking questions of a strategic sort; like impressed spacehands everywhere, the huge mass of the Matriarchy's interstellar holdings meant nothing to them but endlessly riding the Standing Wave, with battle and death lurking at the end of every jump. Luckily also, they were inclined to trust Oberholzer, if only for the low cunning he had shown in keeping most of them alive, especially in the face of unusually Crimean orders from the bridge.

This time Oberholzer would need every ounce of trust and erg of obedience they would give him. Though he never expected anything but the worst, he had a queer cold feeling that this time he was going to get it. There were hardly any data to go on yet, but there had been something about Calle that looked persuasively like the end of the line.

Very few of the forty men in the wardroom even looked up as Oberholzer entered. They were checking their gear in the dismal light of the fluorescents, with the single-mindedness of men to whom a properly wound gun-tube coil, a properly set face-shield gasket, a properly fueled and focused

vaulting jet, have come to mean more than parents, children, retirement pensions, the rule of law, or the logic of empire.

The only man to show any flicker of interest was Sergeant Cassiriras was normal, since he was Oberholzer's understudy and he did no more than look up from over the straps of his antigas suit and say, "Well?"

"Well," Oberholzer said, "now hear this."

There was a sort of composite jingle and clank as the men lowered their gear to the deck or put it aside on their bunks.

"We're investing a planet called Calle in the Canes Venatici cluster," Oberholzer said, sitting down on an olive-drab canvas pack stuffed with lysurgic acid grenades. "A cruiser called the Assam Dragon you were with her on her shakedown, weren't you, Humber? touched down here ten years ago with a flock of tenders and got swallowed up.

They got two or three quick yells for help out and that was that nothing anybody could make much sense of, no weapons named or description of the enemy. So here we are, loaded for the kill."

"Wasn't any Galley in command of the Assam Dragon when I was aboard," Humber said doubtfully.

"Nah. Place was named for the astronomer who spotted her, from the rim of the cluster, a hundred years ago,"

Oberholzer said. "Nobody names planets for ship captains. Anybody got any sensible questions?"

"Just what kind of trouble are we looking for?" Cassirir said.

"That's just it we don't know. This is closer to the center of the Galaxy than we've ever gotten before. It may be a population center too; could be that Calle is just one piece of a federation, at least inside its own cluster. That's why we've got the boys from Momma on board; this one could be damn important."

Somebody sniffed. "If this cluster is full of people, how come we never picked up signals from it?"

"How do you know we never did?" Oberholzer retorted.

"For all I know, maybe that's why the Assam Dragon came here in the first place. Anyhow that's not our problem. All we're"

The lights went out. Simultaneously, the whole mass of the Novoe Washingtongrad shuddered savagely, as though a boulder almost as big as she was had been dropped on her. Seconds later, the gravity went out too.

2

Flo-Mar 12-Upjohn knew no more of the real nature of the disaster than did the wardroom squad, nor did anybody on the bridge, for that matter. The blow had been undetectable until it struck, and then most of the fleet was simply annihilated; only the Hobo was big enough to survive the blow, and she survived only partially in fact, in five

pieces. Nor did the Consort of State ever know by what miracle the section he was in hit Calle still partially under power; he was not privy to the self-salvaging engineering principles of battleships. All he knew once he struggled back to consciousness was that he was still alive, and that there was a broad shaft of sunlight coming through a top-to-bottom split in one wall of what had been his office aboard ship.

He held his ringing head for a while, then got up in search of water. Nothing came out of the dispenser, so he unstrapped his dispatch case from the underside of his desk and produced a pint palladium flask of vodka. He had screwed up his face to sample this at the moment he would have preferred water when a groan reminded him that there might be more than one room in his suddenly shrunken universe, as well as other survivors.

He was right on both counts. "Though the ship section he was in consisted mostly of engines of whose function he had no notion, there were also three other staterooms. Two of these were deserted, but the third turned out to contain a battered member of his own staff, by name Robin One.

The young man was not yet conscious and 12-Up]ohn regarded him with a faint touch of despair. Robin One was perhaps the last man in space that the Consort of State would have chosen to be shipwrecked with.

That he was utterly expendable almost went without say-

ing; he was, after all, a drone. When the perfection of sperm electrophoresis had enabled parents for the first time to predetermine the sex of their children, the predictable result had been an enormous glut of males which was directly accountable for the present regime on Earth. By the time the people and the lawmakers, thoroughly frightened by the crazy years of fashion upheavals, "beefcake," polyandry, male prostitution, and all the rest, had come to their senses, the Matriarchy was in to stay; a weak electric current had overturned civilized society as drastically as the steel knife had demoralized the Eskimos.

Though the tide of excess males had since receded somewhat, it had left behind a wrack, of which Robin One was a bubble. He was a drone, and hence superfluous by definition fit only to be sent colonizing, on diplomatic missions or otherwise thrown away.

Superfluity alone, of course, could hardly account for his presence on 12-Upjohn's staff. Officially, Robin One was an interpreter; actually since nobody could know the language the Consort of State might be called upon to understand on this mission he was a poet, a class of unattached males with special privileges in the Matriarchy, particularly if what they wrote was of the middling-difficult or Hillyer Society sort. Robin One was an eminently typical member of this class, distractible, sulky, jealous, easily wounded, homo-

sexual, lazy except when writing, and probably (to give him the benefit of the doubt, for 12-Upjohn had no ear whatever for poetry) the second-worst poet of his generation.

It had to be admitted that assigning 12-Upjohn a poet as an interpreter on this mission had not been a wholly bad idea, and that if Hildegard MuUer of the Interstellar Understanding Commission had not thought of it, no mere male would have been likely to least of all Bar-Rob 4-Agberg, Director of Assimilation. The nightmare of finding the whole of the center of the Galaxy organized into one vast federation, much older than Earth's, had been troubling the State Department for a long time, at first from purely theoretical considerations all those heart-stars were much older than those in the spiral arms, and besides, where star density in space is so much higher, interstellar travel does not look like quite so insuperable an obstacle as it long had to Earthmen and later from certain practical signs, of which the obliteration of the Assam Dragon and her tenders had been only the most provocative. Getting along with these people on the first contact would be vital, and yet the language barrier might well provoke a tragedy wanted by neither side, as the obliteration of Nagasaki in World War II had been provoked by the mistranslation of a single word. Under such circumstances, a man with a feeling for strange words in odd relationships might well prove to be useful, or even vital.

Nevertheless, it was with a certain grim enjoyment that

12-Upjohn poured into Robin One a good two-ounce jolt of vodka. Robin coughed convulsively and sat up, blinking.

"Your Excellency how what's happened? I thought we were dead. But we've got lights again, and gravity."

He was observant, that had to be granted. "The lights are ours but the gravity is Calle's," 12-Upjohn explained tersely.

"We're in a part of the ship that cracked up."

"Well, it's good that we've got power."

"We can't afford to be philosophical about it. Whatever shape it's in, this derelict is a thoroughly conspicuous object and we'd better get out of it in a hurry."

"Why?" Robin said. "We were supposed to make contact with these people. Why not just sit here until they notice and come to see us?"

"Suppose they just blast us to smaller bits instead? They didn't stop to parley with the fleet, you'll notice."

"This is a different situation," Robin said stubbornly.

"I wouldn't have stopped to parley with that fleet myself, if I'd had the means of knocking it out first. It didn't look a bit like a diplomatic mission. But why should they be afraid of a piece of a wreck?"

The Consort of State stroked the back of his neck reflectively. The boy had a point. It was risky; on the other hand, how long would they survive foraging in completely unknown territory? And yet obviously they couldn't stay

cooped up in here forever especially if it was true that there was already no water.

He was spared having to make up his mind by a halloo from the direction of the office. After a startled stare at each other, the two hit the deck running.

Sergeant Oberholzer's face was peering grimly through the split in the bulkhead.

"Oho," he said. "So you did make it." He said something unintelligible to some invisible person outside, and then squirmed through the breach into the room, with considerable difficulty, since he was in full battle gear. "None of the officers did, so I guess that puts you in command."

"In command of what?" 12-Upjohn said dryly.

"Not very much," the Marine admitted. "I've got five men surviving, one of them with a broken hip, and a section of the ship with two drive units in it. It would lift, more or less, if we could jury-rig some controls, but I don't know where we'd go in it without supplies or a navigator or an overdrive, for that matter." He looked about speculatively.

"There was a Standing Wave transceiver in this section, I think, but it'd be a miracle if it still functioned."

"Would you know how to test it?" Robin asked.

"No. Anyhow we've got more immediate business than that. We've picked up a native. What's more, he speaks English must have picked it up from the Assam Dragon. We started to ask him questions, but it turns out he's some

sort of top official, so we brought him over here on the off chance that one of you was alive."

"What a break!" Robin One said explosively.

"A whole series of them," 12-Upjohn agreed, none too happily. He had long ago learned to be at his most suspicious when the breaks seemed to be coming his way. "Well, better bring him in."

"Can't," Oberholzer said. "Apologies, Your Excellency, but he wouldn't fit. You'll have to come to him."

3

It was impossible to imagine what sort of stock the Callean had evolved from. He seemed to be a thoroughgoing mixture of several different phyla. Most of him was a brown, segmented tube about the diameter of a barrel and perhaps twenty-five feet long, rather like a cross between a python and a worm. The front segments were carried upright, raising the head a good ten feet off the ground.

Properly speaking, 12-Upjohn thought, the Callean really had no head, but only a front end, marked by two enormous faceted eyes and three upsetting simple eyes which were usually closed. Beneath these there was a collar of six short, squidlike tentacles, carried wrapped around the creature in a ropy ring. He was as impossible-looking as he was fearsome, and 12-Upjohn felt at a multiple disadvantage from the beginning.

"How did you learn our language?" he said, purely as a starter.

"I learned it from you," the Callean said promptly. The voice was unexpectedly high, a quality which was accentuated by the creature's singsong intonation; 12-Upjohn could not see where it was coming from. "From your ship which I took apart, the dragon-of-war."

"Why did you do that?"

"It was evident that you meant me ill," the Callean sang.

"At that time I did not know that you were sick, but that became evident at the dissections."

"Dissections! You dissected the crew of the Dragon?"

"All but one."

There was a growl from Oberholzer. The Consort of State shot him a warning glance.

"You may have made a mistake," 12-Upjohn said. "A natural mistake, perhaps. But it was our purpose to offer you trade and peaceful relationships. Our weapons were only precautionary."

"I do not think so," the Callean said, "and I never make mistakes. That you make mistakes is natural, but it is not natural to me."

12-Upjohn felt his jaw dropping. That the creature meant what he said could not be doubted; his command of the language was too complete to permit any more sensible interpretation. 12-Upjohn found himself at a loss; not only

was the statement the most staggering he had ever heard from any sentient being, but while it was being made he had discovered how the Callean spoke: the sounds issued at low volume from a multitude of spiracles or breath-holes all along the body, each hole producing only one pure tone, the words and intonations being formed in mid-air by inter-modulation a miracle of co-ordination among a multitude of organs obviously unsuitable for sound-forming at all. This thing was formidable that would have been evident even without the lesson of the chunk of the Novae Washington-grad canted crazily in the sands behind them.

Sands? He looked about with a start. Until that moment the Callean had so hypnotized his attention that he had forgotten to look at the landscape, but his unconscious had registered it. Sand, and nothing but sand. If there were better parts of Calle than this desert, they were not visible from here, all the way to the horizon.

"What do you propose to do with us?" he said at last. There was really nothing else to say; cut off in every possible sense from his home world, he no longer had any base from which to negotiate.

"Nothing," the Callean said. "You are free to come and go as you please."

"You're no longer afraid of us?"

"No. When you came to kill me I prevented you, but you

can no longer do that."

"There you've made a mistake, all right," Oberholzer said, lifting his rifle toward the multicolored, glittering jewels of the Callean's eyes. "You know what this is they must have had them on the Dragon."

"Don't be an idiot, Sergeant," 12-Upjohn said sharply.

"We're in no position to make any threats." Nor, he added silently, should the Marine have called attention to his gun before the Callean had taken any overt notice of it.

"I know what it is," the creature said. "You cannot kill me with that. You tried it often before and found you could not. You would remember this if you were not sick."

"I never saw anything that I couldn't kill with a Sussmann flamer," Oberholzer said between his teeth. "Let me try it on the bastard, Your Excellency."

"Wait a minute," Robin One said, to 12-Upjohn's astonishment. "I want to ask some questions if you don't mind, Your Excellency?"

"I don't mind," 12-Upjohn said after an instant. Anything to get the Marine's crazy impulse toward slaughter side-tracked. "Go ahead."

"Did you dissect the crew of the Assam Dragon personally?" Robin asked the Callean.

"Of course."

"Are you the ruler of this planet?"

"Yes."

"Are you the only person in this system?"

"No."

Robin paused and frowned. Then he said: "Are you the only person of your species in your system?"

"No. There is another on Xixobraxthe fourth planet."

Robin paused once more, but not, it seemed to 12-Upjohn, as though he were in any doubt; it was only as though he were gathering his courage for the key question of all. 12-Upjohn tried to imagine what it might be, and failed.

"How many of you are there?" Robin One said.

"I cannot answer that. As of the instant you asked me that question, there were eighty-three hundred thousand billion, one hundred and eighty nine million, four hundred and sixty five thousand, one hundred and eighty; but now the number has changed, and it goes on changing."

"Impossible," 12-Upjohn said, stunned. "Not even two planets could support such a number and you'd never allow a desert like this to go on existing if you had even a fraction of that population to support. I begin to think, sir, that you are a type normal to my business: the ordinary, unimaginative liar."

"He's not lying," Robin said, his voice quivering. "It all fits together. Just let me finish, sir, please. I'll explain, but I've got to go through to the end first."

"Well," 12-Upjohn said, helplessly, "all right, go ahead."

But he was instantly sorry, for what Robin One said was:

"Thank you. I have no more questions."

The Callean turned in a great liquid wheel and poured away across the sand dunes at an incredible speed. 12-Upjohn shouted after him, without any clear idea of what it was that he was shouting but no matter, for the Callean took no notice. Within seconds, it seemed, he was only a threadworm in the middle distance, and then he was gone. They were all alone in the chill desert air.

Oberholzer lowered his rifle bewilderedly. "He's fast," he said to nobody in particular. "Gripes, but he's fast. I couldn't even keep him in the sights."

"That proves it," Robin said tightly. He was trembling, but whether with fright or elation, 12-Upjohn could not tell; possibly both.

"It had better prove something," the Consort of State said, trying hard not to sound portentous. There was something about this bright remote desert that made empty any possible pretense to dignity. "As far as I can see, you've just lost us what may have been our only chance to treat with these creatures . . . just as surely as the sergeant would have done it with his gun. Explain, please."

"I didn't really catch on until I realized that he was using the second person singular when he spoke to us," Robin said. If he had heard any threat implied in 12-Upjohn's charge, it was not visible; he seemed totally preoccupied.

"There's no way to tell them apart in modern English. We thought he was referring to us as 'you' plural, but he wasn't, any more than his 'I' was a plural. He thinks we're all a part of the same personality including the men from the Dragon, too just as he is himself. That's why he left when I said I had no more questions. He can't comprehend that each of us has an independent ego. For him such a thing doesn't exist."

"Like ants?" 12-Upjohn said slowly. "I don't see how an advanced technology . . . but no, I do see. And if it's so, it means that any Callean we run across could be their chief of state, but that no one of them actually is. The only other real individual is next door, on the fourth planet another hive ego."

"Maybe not," Robin said. "Don't forget that he thinks we're part of one, too."

12-Upjohn dismissed that possibility at once. "He's sure to know his own system, after all. . . . What alarms me is the population figure he cited. It's got to be at least clusterwide and from the exactness with which he was willing to cite it, for a given instant, he had to have immediate access to it. An instant, effortless census."

"Yes," Robin said. "Meaning mind-to-mind contact, from one to all, throughout the whole complex. That's what started me thinking about the funny way he used pronouns."

"If that's the case. Robin, we are spurlos versenkt. And my pronoun includes the Earth."

"They may have some limitations," Robin said, but it was clear that he was only whistling in the dark. "But at least it explains why they butchered the Dragon's crew so readily and why they're willing to let us wander around their planet as if we didn't even exist. We don't, for them. They can't have any respect for a single life. No wonder they didn't give a damn for the sergeant's gun!"

His initial flush had given way to a marble paleness; there were beads of sweat on his brow in the dry hot air, and he was trembling harder than ever. He looked as though he might faint in the next instant, though only the slightest of stutters disturbed his rush of words. But for once the Consort of State could not accuse him of agitation over trifles.

Oberholzer looked from one to the other, his expression betraying perhaps only disgust, or perhaps blank incomprehension it was impossible to tell. Then, with a sudden sharp snick which made them both start, he shot closed the safety catch on the Sussmann.

"Well," he said in a smooth cold empty voice, "now we know what we'll eat."

4

Their basic and dangerous division of plans and purposes began with that.

Sergeant Oberholzer was not a fool, as the hash marks on his sleeve and the battle stars on his ribbons attested plainly; he understood the implications of what the Callean had said at least after the Momma's boy had interpreted them; and he was shrewd enough not to undervalue the contribution the poor terrified fairy had made to their possible survival on this world. For the moment, however, it suited the Marine to play the role of the dumb sergeant to the hilt. If a full understanding of what the Calleans were like might reduce him to a like state of trembling impotence, he could do without it.

Not that he really believed that any such thing could happen to him; but it was not hard to see that Momma's boys were halfway there already and if the party as a whole hoped to get anything done, they had to be jolted out of it as fast as possible.

At first he thought he had made it. "Certainly not!" the Consort of State said indignantly. "You're a man, sergeant, not a Callean. Nothing the Calleans do is any excuse for your behaving otherwise than as a man."

"I'd rather eat an enemy than a friend," Oberholzer said cryptically. "Have you got any supplies inside there?"

"I don't know. But that has nothing to do with it."

"Depends on what you mean by 'it.' But maybe we can argue about that later. What are your orders. Your

Excellency?"

"I haven't an order in my head," 12-Upjohn said with sudden, disarming frankness. "We'd better try to make some sensible plans first, and stop bickering. Robin, stop snuffling, too. The question is, what can we do besides trying to survive, and cherishing an idiot hope for a rescue mission?"

"For one thing, we can try to spring the man from the Dragon's crew that these worms have still got alive," Oberholzer said. "If that's what he meant when he said they dissected all but one."

"That doesn't seem very feasible to me," 12-Upjohn said.

"We have no idea where they're holding him"

"Ask them. This one answered every question you asked him."

"and even supposing that he's near by, we couldn't free him from a horde of Calleans, no matter how many dead bodies they let you pile up. At best, sooner or later you'd run out of ammunition."

"It's worth trying," Oberholzer said. "We could use the manpower."

"What for?" Robin One demanded. "He'd be- just one more mouth to feed. At the moment, at least, they're feeding him."

"For raising ship," Oberholzer retorted, "if there's any damn chance of welding our two heaps of junk together and getting off this mudball. We ought to look into it, anyhow."

Robin One was looking more alarmed by the minute. If

the prospect of getting into a fight with the Calleans had scared him, Oberholzer thought, the notion of hard physical labor evidently was producing something close to panic.

"Where could we go?" he said. "Supposing that we could fly such a shambles at all?"

"I don't know," Oberholzer said. "We don't know what's possible yet. But anything's better than sitting around here and starving. First off, I want that man from the Dragon."

"I'm opposed to it," 12-Upjohn said firmly. "The Calleans are leaving us to our own devices now. If we cause any real trouble they may well decide that we'd be safer locked up, or dead. I don't mind planning to lift ship if we can but no military expeditions."

"Sir," Oberholzer said, "military action on this planet is what I was sent here for. I reserve the right to use my own judgment. You can complain, if we ever get back but I'm not going to let a man rot in a worm-burrow while I've got a gun on my back. You can come along or not, but we're going."

He signaled to Cassirir, who seemed to be grinning slightly. 12-Upjohn stared at him for a moment, and then shook his head.

"We'll stay," he said. "Since we have no water. Sergeant, I hope you'll do us the kindness of telling us where your part of the ship lies."

"That way, about two kilometers," Oberholzer said. "Help yourself. If you want to settle in there, you'll save us the trouble of toting Private Hannes with us on a stretcher."

"Of course," the Consort of State said. "We'll take care of him. But, Sergeant . . ."

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"If this stunt of yours still leaves us all alive afterwards, and we do get back to any base of ours, I will certainly see to it that a complaint is lodged. I'm not disowning you now because it's obvious that we'll all have to work together to survive, and a certain amount of amity will be essential. But don't be deceived by that."

"I understand, sir," Oberholzer said levelly. "Cassirir, let's go. We'll backtrack to where we nabbed the worm, and then follow his trail to wherever he came from. Fall in."

The men shouldered their Sussmanns. 12-Upjohn and Robin One watched them go. At the last dune before the two would go out of sight altogether, Oberholzer turned and waved, but neither waved back. Shrugging, Oberholzer resumed plodding.

"Sarge?"

"Yeah?"

"How do you figure to spring this joker with only four guns?"

"Five guns if we spring him I've got a side arm," Oberholzer reminded him. "We'll play it by ear, that's all. I want

to see just how serious these worms are about leaving us alone, and letting us shoot them if we feel like it. I've got a hunch that they aren't very bright, one at a time, and don't react fast to strictly local situations. If this whole planet is like one huge body, and the worms are its brain cells, then we're germs and maybe it'd take more than four germs to make the body do anything against us that counted, at least fast enough to do any good."

Cassirir was frowning absurdly; he did not seem to be taking the theory in without pain. Well, Cassirir had never been much of a man for tactics.

"Here's where we found the guy," one of the men said, pointing at the sand.

"That's not much of a trail," Cassirir said. "If there's any wind it'll be wiped out like a shot."

"Take a sight on it, that's all we need. You saw him run off straight as a ruled line, no twists or turns around the dunes or anything. Like an army ant. If the trail sands over, we'll follow the sight. It's a cinch it leads someplace."

"All right," Cassirir said, getting out his compass. After a while the four of them resumed trudging.

There were only a few drops of hot, flat-tasting water left in the canteens, and their eyes were gritty and red from dryness and sand, when they topped the ridge that overlooked the nest. The word sprang instantly into Oberholzer's mind,

though perhaps he had been expecting some such thing ever since Robin One had compared the Calleans to ants.

It was a collection of rough white spires, each perhaps fifty feet high, rising from a common doughlike mass which almost filled a small valley. There was no greenery around it and no visible source of water, but there were three roads, two of them leading into oval black entrances which Oberholzer could see from here. Occasionally not often a Callean would scuttle out and vanish, or come speeding over the horizon and dart into the darkness. Some of the spires bore masts carrying what seemed to be antennae or more recondite electronic devices, but there were no windows to be seen; and the only sound in the valley, except for the dry dusty wind, was a subdued composite hum.

"Man!" Cassirir said, whispering without being aware of it. "It must be as black as the ace of spades in there. Anybody got a torch?"

Nobody had. "We won't need one anyhow," Oberholzer said confidently. "They've got eyes, and they can see in desert sunlight. That means they can't move around in total darkness. Let's go! I'm thirsty."

They stumbled down into the valley and approached the nearest black hole cautiously. Sure enough, it was not as black as it had appeared from the hill; there was a glow inside, which had been hidden from them against the contrast of the glaringly lit sands. Nevertheless, Oberholzer found

himself hanging back.

While he hesitated, a Callean came rocketing out of the entrance and pulled to a smooth, sudden stop.

"You are not to get in the way," he said, in exactly the same piping singsong voice the other had used.

"Tell me where to go and I'll stay out of your way,"

Oberholzer said. "Where is the man from the warship that you didn't dissect?"

"In Gnitonis, halfway around the world from here."

Oberholzer felt his shoulders sag, but the Callean was not through. "You should have told me that you wanted him," he said. "I will have him brought to you. Is there else that you need?"

"Water," Oberholzer said hopefully.

"That will be brought. There is no water you can use here.

Stay out of the cities; you will be in the way."

"How else can we eat?"

"Food will be brought. You should make your needs known; you are of low intelligence and helpless. I forbid nothing, I know you are harmless, and your life is short in any case; but I do not want you to get in the way."

The repetition was beginning to tell on Oberholzer, and the frustration created by his having tried to use a battering ram against a freely swinging door was compounded by his mental picture of what the two Momma's boys would say

when the squad got back.

"Thank you," he said, and bringing the Sussmann into line, he trained it on the Callean's squidlike head and squeezed the trigger.

It was at once established that the CallSans were as mortal to Sussmann flammers as is all other flesh and blood; this one made a very satisfactory corpse. Unsatisfied, the flamer bolt went on to burn a long slash in the wall of the nest, not far above the entrance. Oberholzer grounded the rifle and waited to see what would happen next; his men hefted their weapons tensely.

For a few minutes there was no motion but the random twitching of the headless Callean's legs. Evidently he was still not entirely dead, though he was a good four feet shorter than he had been before, and plainly was feeling the lack.

Then, there was a stir inside the dark entrance.

A ten-legged animal about the size of a large rabbit emerged tentatively into the sunlight, followed by two more, and then by a whole series of them, perhaps as many as twenty. Though Oberholzer had been unabashed by the Calleans themselves, there was something about these things that made him feel sick. They were coal black and shiny, and they did not seem to have any eyes; their heavily armored heads bore nothing but a set of rudimentary palps and a pair of enormous pincers, like those of a June beetle. Sightless or no, they were excellent surgeons. They cut

the remains of the Callean swiftly into sections, precisely one metamere to a section, and bore the carrion back inside the nest. Filled with loathing, Oberholzer stepped quickly forward and kicked one of the last in the procession. It toppled over like an unstable kitchen stool, but regained its footing as though nothing had happened. The kick had not hurt it visibly, though Oberholzer's toes felt as though he had kicked a Victorian iron dog. The creature, still holding its steak delicately in its living tongs, munched implacably after the others back into the dubiety of the nest. Then all that was left in the broiling sunlight was a few pools of blackening blood seeping swiftly into the sand.

"Let's get out of here," Cassirir said raggedly.

"Stand fast," Oberholzer growled. "If they're mad at us, I want to know about it right now."

But the next Callean to pass them, some twenty eternal minutes later, hardly even slowed down. "Keep out of the way," he said, and streaked away over the dunes. Snarling, Oberholzer caromed a bolt after him, but missed him clean.

"All right," he said. "Let's go back. No hitting the canteens till we're five kilometers past the mid-point cairn.

Marchi"

The men were all on the verge of prostration by the time that point was passed, but Oberholzer never once had to enforce the order. Nobody, it appeared, was eager to come

to an end on Calle as a series of butcher's cuts in the tongs of a squad of huge black beetles.

"I know what they think," the man from the Assam Dragon said. "I've heard them say it often enough."

He was a personable youngster, perhaps thirty, with blond wavy hair which had been turned almost white by the strong Callean sunlight: his captors had walked him. for three hours every day on the desert. He had once been the Assam Dragon's radioman, a post which in interstellar flight is a branch of astronomy, not of communications; nevertheless, Oberholzer and the marines called him Sparks, in deference to a tradition which, 12-Upjohn suspected, the marines did not even know existed.

"Then why wouldn't there be a chance of our establishing better relations with the 'person' on the fourth planet?" 12-Upjohn said. "After all, there's never been an Earth landing there."

"Because the 'person' on Xixobrax is a colony of Callg, and knows everything that goes on here. It took the two planets in co-operation to destroy the fleet. There's almost full telepathic communion between the twain fact, all through the Central Empire. The only rapport that seems to weaken over short distancesinterplanetary distancesb the sense of identity. That's why each planet has an I' of its own, its own ego. But it's not the kind of ego we know anything about. Xixobrax wouldn't give us any better deal

than Calle has, any more than I'd give Calle a better deal than you would, Your Excellency. They have common purposes and allegiances. All the Central Empire seems to be like that."

12-Upjohn thought about it; but he did not like what he thought. It was a knotty problem, even in theory.

Telepathy among men had never amounted to anything.

After the pioneer exploration of the microcosm with the Arpe Effect the second of two unsuccessful attempts at an interstellar drive, long before the discovery of the Standing Wave it had become easy to see why this would be so.

Psi forces in general were characteristic only of the subspace in which the primary particles of the atom had their being; their occasional manifestations in the macrocosm were statistical accidents, as weak and indirigible as spontaneous radioactive decay.

Up to now this had suited 12-Upjohn. It had always seemed to him that the whole notion of telepathy was a dodgean attempt to by-pass the plain duty of each man to learn to know his brother, and, if possible, to learn to love him; the telepathy fanatics were out to short-circuit the task, to make easy the most difficult assignment a human being might undertake. He was well aware, too, of the bias against telepathy which was inherent in his profession of mplotmat; yet he had always been certain of his case, hazy

though it was around the edges. One of his proofs was that telepathy's main defenders invariably were incorrigibly lazy writers, from Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser all the way down to . . .

All the same, it seemed inarguable that the whole center of the Galaxy, an enormously diverse collection of peoples and cultures, was being held together in a common and strife-free union by telepathy alone, or perhaps by telepathy and its even more dubious adjuncts: a whole galaxy held together by a force so unreliable that two human beings sitting across from each other at a card table had never been able to put it to an even vaguely practicable use.

Somewhere, there was a huge hole in the argument.

While he had sat helplessly thinking in these circles, even Robin One was busy, toting power packs to the welding crew which was working outside to braze together on the desert the implausible, misshapen lump of metal which the Marine sergeant was fanatically determined would become a ship again. Now the job was done, though no shipwright would admire it, and the question of where to go with it was being debated in full council. Sparks, for his part, was prepared to bet that the Calleans would not hinder their departure.

"Why would they have given us all this oxygen and stuff if they were going to prevent us from using it?" he said reasonably. "They know what it's foreven if they have no brains, collectively they're plenty smart enough."

"No brains?" 12-Upjohn said. "Or are you just exaggerating?"

"No brains," the man from the Assam Dragon insisted.

"Just lots of ganglia. I gather that's the way all of the races of the Central Empire are organized, regardless of other physical differences. That's what they mean when they say we're all sick hadn't you realized that?"

"No," 12-Upjohn said in slowly dawning horror. "You had better spell it out."

"Why, they say that's why we get cancer. They say that the brain is the ultimate source of all tumors, and is itself a tumor. They call it 'hostile symbiosis.' "

"Malignant?"

"In the long run. Races that develop them kill themselves off. Something to do with solar radiation; animals on planets of Population II stars develop them, Population I planets don't."

Robin One hummed an archaic twelve-tone series under his breath. There were no words to go with it, but the Consort of State recognized it; it was part of a chorale from a twentieth-century American opera, and the words went:

Weep, weep beyond time for this Earth of hours.

"If fits," he said heavily. "So to receive and use a weak field like telepathy, you need a weak brain. Human beings will never make it."

"Earthworms of the galaxy, unite," Robin One said.

"They already have," Sergeant Oberholzer pointed out.

"So where does all this leave us?"

"It means," 12-Upjohn said slowly, "that this Central Empire, where the stars are almost all Population I, is spreading out toward the spiral arms where the Earth lies. Any cluster civilizations they meet are natural allies clusters are purely Population I and probably have already been mentally assimilated. Any possible natural allies we meet, going around Population II stars, we may well pick a fight with instead."

"That's not what I meant," Sergeant Oberholzer said.

"I know what you meant; but this changes things. As I understand it, we have a chance of making a straight hop to the nearest Earth base, if we go on starvation rations"

"and if I don't make more than a point zero five per cent error in plotting the course," Sparks put in.

"Yes. On the other hand, we can make sure of getting there by going in short leaps via planets known to be inhabited, but never colonized and possibly hostile. The only other possibility is Xixobrax, which I think we've ruled out. Correct?"

"Right as rain," Sergeant Oberholzer said. "Now I see what you're driving at. Your Excellency. The only thing is you didn't mention that the stepping stone method will take us the rest of our lives."

"So I didn't," 12-Upjohn said bleakly. "But I hadn't forgotten it. The other side of that coin is that it will be even longer than that before the Matriarchy and the Central Empire collide."

"After which," Sergeant Oberholzer said with a certain relish, "I doubt that it'll be a Matriarchy, whichever wins. Are you calling for a vote, sir?"

"Wellyes, I seem to be."

"Then let's grasshopper," Sergeant Oberholzer said unhesitatingly. "The boys and I can't fight a point zero five per cent error in navigation but for hostile planets, we've got the flamers."

Robin One shuddered. "I don't mind the fighting part," he said unexpectedly. "But I do simply loathe the thought of being an old, old man when I get home. All the same, we do have to get the word back."

"You're agreeing with the sergeant?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

"I agree," Sparks said. "Either way we may not make it, but the odds are in favor of doing it the hard way."

"Very good," 12-Upjohn said. He was uncertain of his exact emotion at this moment; perhaps gloomy satisfaction was as close a description as any. "I make it unanimous. Let's get ready."

The sergeant saluted and prepared to leave the cabin; but

suddenly he turned back.

"I didn't think very much of either of you, a while back,"

he said brutally. "But I'll tell you this: there must be something about brains that involves guts, too. I'll back 'em any time against any critter that lets itself be shot like a fish in a barrel whatever the odds."

The Consort of State was still mulling that speech over as the madman's caricature of an interstellar ship groaned and lifted its lumps and angles from Calle. Who knows, he kept telling himself, who knows, it might even be true.

But he noticed that Robin One was still humming the chorale from *Psyche and Eros*, and ahead the galactic night was as black as death.

The End