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JAMES H. SCHMITZ

AGENT OF VEGA

& OTHER STORIES



**WITH A PREFACE BY
MERCEDES LACKEY**

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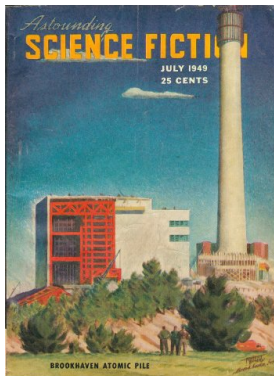
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"Agent of Vega"

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A new author points out that, in an inhabited galaxy, trouble can grow to enormous size

before any organization becomes aware
that the danger's a-brewing!

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"It just happens," the Third Co-ordinator of the Vegan Confederacy explained patiently, "that the local Agent--it's Zone Seventeen Eighty-two--isn't available at the moment. In fact, he isn't expected to contact this hq for at least another week. And since the matter really needs prompt attention, and you happened to be passing within convenient range of the spot, I thought of you."

"I like these little extra jobs I get whenever you think of me," commented the figure in the telepath transmitter before him. It was that of a small, wiry man with rather cold yellow eyes--sitting against an undefined dark background, he might have been a minor criminal or the skipper of an aging space-tramp.

"After the last two of them, as I recall it," he continued pointedly, "I turned in my final mission report from the emergency treatment tank of my ship-- And if you'll remember, I'd have been back in my own Zone by now if you hadn't sent me chasing a wild-eyed rumor in this direction!"

He leaned forward with an obviously false air of hopeful anticipation. "Now this wouldn't just possibly be another hot lead on U-1, would it?"

"No, no! Nothing like that!" the Co-ordinator said soothingly. In his mental file the little man was listed as "Zone Agent Iliff, Zone Thirty-six Oh-six; unrestricted utility; try not to irritate--" There was a good deal more of it, including the notation:

"U-1: The Agent's failure-shock regarding this subject has been developed over the past twelve-year period into a settled fear-fix of prime-motive proportions. The Agent may now be entrusted with the conclusion of this case, whenever the opportunity is presented."

That was no paradox to the Co-ordinator who, as Chief of the Department of Galactic Zones, was Iliff's immediate superior. He knew the peculiar qualities of his agents--and how to make the most economical use of them, while they lasted.

"It's my own opinion," he offered cheerily, "that U-1 has been dead for years. Though I'll admit Correlation doesn't agree with me there."

"Correlation's often right," Iliff remarked, still watchfully. He added, "U-1 appeared excessively healthy the last time I got near him."

"Well, that was twelve standard years ago," the Co-ordinator murmured. "If he were still around, he'd have taken a bite out of us before this--a big bite! Just to tell us he doesn't think the Galaxy is quite wide enough for him and the Confederacy both. He's not the type to lie low longer than he has to." He paused. "Or do you think you might have shaken some of his supremacy ideas out of him that last time?"

"Not likely," said Iliff. The voice that came from the transmitter, the thought that carried it, were equally impassive. "He booby-trapped me good. To him it wouldn't even have seemed like a fight."

The Co-ordinator shrugged. "Well, there you are! Anyway, this isn't that kind of job at all. It's actually a rather simple assignment."

liff winced.

"No, I mean it! What this job takes is mostly tact--always one of your strongest points, liff."

The statement was not entirely true; but the Agent ignored it and the Co-ordinator went on serenely:

". . . so I've homed you full information on the case. Your ship should pick it up in an hour, but you might have questions; so here it is, in brief:

"Two weeks ago, the Bureau of Interstellar Crime sends an operative to a planet called Gull in Seventeen Eighty-two--that's a mono-planet system near Lycanno, just a bit off your present route. You been through that neighborhood before?"

liff blinked yellow eyes and produced a memory. "We went through Lycanno once. Seventeen or eighteen Habitables; population a-Class Human; Class d politics-- How far is Gull from there?"

"Eighteen hours' cruising speed, or a little less--but you're closer to it than that right now. This operative was to make positive identification of some ex-spacer called Tahmey, who'd been reported there, and dispose of him. Routine interstellar stuff, *but*--twenty-four hours ago, the operative sends back a message that she finds positive identification impossible . . . and that she wants a Zone Agent."

He looked expectantly at liff. Both of them knew perfectly well that the execution of a retired piratical spacer was no part of a Zone Agent's job--furthermore, that every Interstellar operative was aware of the fact; and finally, that such a request should have induced the Bureau to recall its operative for an immediate mental overhaul and several months' vacation before he or she could be risked on another job.

"Give," Iliff suggested patiently.

"The difference," the Co-ordinator explained, "is that the operative is one of our Lannai trainees."

"I see," said the Agent.

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He did. The Lannai were high type humanoids and the first people of their classification to be invited to join the Vegan Confederacy--till then open only to Homo sapiens and the interesting variety of mutant branches of that old Terrestrial stock.

The invitation had been sponsored, against formidable opposition, by the Department of Galactic Zones, with the obvious intention of having the same privilege extended later to as many humanoids and other nonhuman races as could meet the Confederacy's general standards.

As usual, the Department's motive was practical enough. Its king-sized job was to keep the eighteen thousand individual civilizations so far registered in its Zones out of as much dangerous trouble as it could, while nudging them unobtrusively, whenever the occasion was offered, just a little farther into the path of righteousness and order.

It was slow, dangerous, carefully unspectacular work, since it violated, in fact and in spirit, every galactic treaty of nonintervention the Confederacy had ever signed. Worst of all, it was work for which the Department was, of necessity, monstrosly understaffed.

The more political systems, races and civilizations it could draw

directly into the Confederacy, the fewer it would have to keep under that desperately sketchy kind of supervision. Regulations of membership in Vega's super-system were interpreted broadly, but even so they pretty well precluded any dangerous degree of deviation from the ideals that Vega championed.

And if, as a further consequence, Galactic Zones could then draw freely on the often startling abilities and talents of nonhuman peoples to aid in its titanic project--

The Department figuratively licked its chops.

. . .

The opposition was sufficiently rooted in old racial emotions to be extremely bitter and strong. The Traditionalists, working chiefly through the Confederacy's Department of Cultures, wanted no dealings with any race which could not trace its lineage back through the long centuries to Terra itself. Nonhumans had played a significant part in the century-long savage struggles that weakened and finally shattered the first human Galactic Empire.

That mankind, as usual, had asked for it and that its grimmest and most powerful enemies were to be found nowadays among those who could and did claim the same distant Earth-parentage did not noticeably weaken the old argument, which to date had automatically excluded any other stock from membership. In the High Council of the Confederacy, the Department of Cultures, backed by a conservative majority of the Confederacy's members, had, naturally enough, tremendous influence.

Galactic Zones, however--though not one citizen in fifty thousand knew of its existence, and though its arguments could not be openly advanced--had a trifle more.

So the Lannai were in--on probation.

"As you may have surmised," the Third Co-ordinator said glumly, "the Lannai haven't exactly been breaking their necks trying to get in with us, either. In fact, *their* government's had to work for the alliance against almost the same degree of popular disapproval; though on the whole they seem to be a rather more reasonable sort of people than we are. Highly developed natural telepaths, you know--that always seems to make folks a little easier to get along with."

"What's this one doing in Interstellar?" Iliff inquired.

"We've placed a few Lannai in almost every department of the government by now--not, of course, in Galactic Zones! The idea is to prove, to our people and theirs, that Lannai and humans can work for the same goal, share responsibilities, and so on. To prove generally that we're natural allies."

"Has it been proved?"

"Too early to say. They're bright enough and, of course, the ones they sent us were hand-picked and anxious to make good. This Interstellar operative looked like one of the best. She's a kind of relative of the fifth ranking Lannai ruler. That's what would make it bad if it turned out she'd blown up under stress. For one thing, their pride could be hurt enough to make them bolt the alliance. But our Traditionalists certainly would be bound to hear about it, and," the Co-ordinator concluded heatedly, "the Co-ordinator of Cultures would be rising to his big feet again on the subject in Council!"

"An awkward situation, sir," Iliff sympathized, "demanding a great

deal of tact. But then you have that."

"I've got it," agreed the Co-ordinator, "but I'd prefer not to have to use it so much. So if you can find some way of handling that little affair on Gull discreetly— Incidentally, since you'll be just a short run then from Lycanno, there's an undesirable political trend reported building up there. They've dropped from d to h-Class politics inside of a decade. You'll find the local Agent's notes on the matter waiting for you on Gull. Perhaps you might as well skip over and fix it."

"All right," said Iliff coldly. "I won't be needed back in my own Zone for another hundred hours. Not urgently."

"Lab's got a new mind-lock for you to test," the Co-ordinator went on briskly. "You'll find that on Gull, too."

There was a slight pause.

"You remember, don't you," the Agent inquired gently then, as if speaking to an erring child, "what happened the last time I gave one of those gadgets a field test on a highpowered brain?"

"Yes, of course! But if this one *works*," the Co-ordinator pointed out, almost wistfully, "we've got something we really do need. And until I know it does work, under ultimate stresses, I can't give it general distribution. I've picked a hundred of you to try it out." He sighed. "Theoretically, it will hold a mind of any conceivable potential within that mind's own shields, under any conceivable stress, and still permit almost normal investigation. It's been checked to the limit," he concluded encouragingly, "under lab conditions--"

"They all were," Iliff recollected, without noticeable enthusiasm. "Well, I'll see what turns up."

"That's fine!" The Co-ordinator brightened visibly. He added, "We

wouldn't, of course, want you to take any *unnecessary* risks--"

. . .

For perhaps half a minute after the visualization tank of his telepath transmitter had faded back to its normal translucent and faintly luminous green, Iloff continued to stare into it.

Back on Jeltad, the capitol planet of the Confederacy, fourteen thousand light-years away, the Co-ordinator's attention was turning to some other infinitesimal-seeming but significant crisis in the Department's monstrous periphery. The chances were he would not think of Iloff again, or of Zone Seventeen Eighty-two, until Iloff's final mission report came in--or failed to come in within the period already allotted it by the Department's automatic monitors.

In either event, the brain screened by the Co-ordinator's conversational inanities would revert once more to that specific problem then, for as many unhurried seconds, minutes or, it might be, hours as it required. It was one of the three or four human brains in the galaxy for which Zone Agent Iloff had ever felt anything remotely approaching genuine respect.

"How far are we from Gull now?" he said without turning his head.

A voice seemed to form itself in the air a trifle above and behind him.

"A little over eight hours, cruising speed--"

"As soon as I get the reports off the pigeon from Jeltad, step it up so we get there in four," Iloff said. "I think I'll be ready about that time."

"The pigeon just arrived," the voice replied. It was not loud, but it was a curiously *big* voice with something of the overtones of an enormous bronze gong in it. It was also oddly like a cavernous amplification of liff's own type of speech.

The agent turned to a screen on his left, in which a torpedo-like twenty-foot tube of metal had appeared, seemingly suspended in space and spinning slowly about its axis. Actually, it was some five miles from the ship—which was as close as it was healthy to get to a homing pigeon at the end of its voyage—and following it at the ship's exact rate of speed, though it was driven by nothing except an irresistible urge to get to its "roost," the pattern of which had been stamped in its molecules. The roost was on liff's ship, but the pigeon would never get there. No one knew just what sort of subdimensions it flashed through on its way to its objective or what changes were wrought on it before it reappeared, but early experiments with the gadget had involved some highly destructive explosions at its first contact with any solid matter in normal space.

So now it was held by barrier at a safe distance while its contents were duplicated within the ship. Then something lethal flickered from the ship to the pigeon and touched it; and it vanished with no outward indication of violence.

For a time, liff became immersed in the dossiers provided both by Interstellar and his own department. The ship approached and presently drove through the boundaries of Zone Seventeen Eighty-two, and the big voice murmured:

"Three hours to Gull."

"All right," liff said, still absently. "Let's eat."

Nearly another hour passed before he spoke again. "Send her this. Narrow-beam telepath--Gull itself should be close enough, I think. If

you can get it through--"

He stood up, yawned, stretched and bent, and straightened again.

"You know," he remarked suddenly, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the old girl wasn't so wacky, after all. What I mean is," he explained, "she really might *need* a Zone Agent."

"Is it going to be another unpredictable mission?" the voice inquired.

"Aren't they always--when the man picks them for us? What was *that*?"

There was a moment's silence. Then the voice told him, "She's got your message. She'll be expecting you."

"Fast!" Iiff said approvingly. "Now listen. On Gull, we shall be old Trader Casselmath with his stock of exotic and expensive perfumes. So get yourself messed up for the part--but don't spill any of the stuff, this time."

. . .

The suspect's name was Deel. For the past ten years he had been a respected--and respectable--citizen and merchant of the mono-planet System of Gull. He was supposed to have come there from his birthplace, Number Four of the neighboring System of Lycanno.

But the microstructural plates the operative made of him *proved* he was the pirate Tahmey who, very probably, had once been a middling big shot among the ill-famed Ghant Spacers. The Bureau of Interstellar Crime had him on record; and it was a dogma of

criminology that microstructural identification was final and absolute--that the telltale patterns could not be duplicated, concealed, or altered to any major degree without killing the organism.

The operative's people, however, were telepaths, and she was an adept, trained in the widest and most intensive use of the faculty. For a Lannai it was natural to check skeptically, in her own manner, the mechanical devices of another race.

If she had not been an expert she would have been caught then, on her first approach. The mind she attempted to tap was guarded.

By whom or what was a question she did not attempt to answer immediately. There were several of these watch-dogs, of varying degrees of ability. Her thought faded away from the edge of their watchfulness before their attention was drawn to it. It slid past them and insinuated itself deftly through the crude electronic thought-shields used by Tahmey. Such shields were a popular commercial article, designed to protect men with only an average degree of mental training against the ordinary telepathic prowler and entirely effective for that purpose. Against her manner of intrusion they were of no use at all.

But it was a shock to discover then that she was in no way within the mind of Tahmey! This was, in literal fact, the mind of the man named Deel--for the past ten years a citizen of Gull, before that of the neighboring System of Lycanno.

The fact was, to her at least, quite as indisputable as the microstructural evidence that contradicted it. This was not some clumsily linked mass of artificial memory tracts and habit traces, but a living, matured mental personality. It showed few signs of even as much psychosurgery as would be normal in a man of Deel's age and circumstances.

But if it *was* Deel, why should anyone keep a prosperous, reasonably honest and totally insignificant planeteer under telepathic surveillance? She considered investigating the unknown watchers, but the aura of cold, implacable alertness she had sensed in her accidental near-contact with them warned her not to force her luck too far.

"After all," she explained apologetically, "I had no way of estimating their potential."

"No," Iliff agreed, "you hadn't. But I don't think that was what stopped you."



The Lannai operative looked at him steadily for a moment. Her name was Pagadan and, though no more human than a jellyfish, she was to human eyes an exquisitely designed creature. It was rather startling to realize that her Interstellar dossier described her as a combat-type

mind--which implied a certain ruthlessness, at the very least--and also that she had been sent to Gull to act, among other things, as an executioner.

"Now what did you mean by that?" she inquired, on a note of friendly wonder.

"I meant," Iliif said carefully, "that I'd now like to hear all the little details you didn't choose to tell Interstellar. Let's start with your trip to Lycanno."

"Oh, I see!" Pagadan said. "Yes, I went to Lycanno, of course--" She smiled suddenly and became with that, he thought, extraordinarily beautiful, though the huge silvery eyes with their squared black irises, which widened or narrowed flickeringly with every change of mood or shift of light, did not conform exactly to any standard human ideal. No more did her hair, a silver-shimmering fluffy crest of something like feathers--but the general effect, Iliif decided, remained somehow that of a remarkably attractive human woman in permanent fancy dress. According to the reports he'd studied recently, it had pleased much more conservative tastes than his own.

"You're a clever little man, Zone Agent," she said thoughtfully. "I believe I might as well be frank with you. If I'd reported everything I know about this case--though for reasons I shall tell you I really found out very little--the Bureau would almost certainly have recalled me. They show a maddening determination to see that I shall come to no harm while working for them." She looked at him doubtfully. "You understand that, simply because I'm a Lannai, I'm an object of political importance just now?"

Iliif nodded.

"Very well. I discovered in Lycanno that the case *was* a little more than I could handle alone." She shivered slightly, the black irises

flaring wide with what was probably reminiscent fright.

"But I did not want to be recalled. My people," she said a little coldly, "will accept the proposed alliance only if they are to share in your enterprises and responsibilities. They do not wish to be shielded or protected, and it would have a poor effect on them if they learned that we, their first representatives among you, had been relieved of our duties whenever they threatened to involve us in personal danger."

"I see," Iliff said seriously, remembering that she was royalty of a sort, or the Lannai equivalent of it. He shook his head. "The Bureau," he said, "must have quite a time with you."

Pagadan stared and laughed. "No doubt they find me a little difficult at times. Still, I *do* know how to take orders. But in this case it seemed more important to make sure I was not going to be protected again than to appear reasonable and co-operative. So I made use, for the first time, of my special status in the Bureau and insisted that a Zone Agent be sent here. However, I can assure you that the case has developed into an undertaking that actually will require a Zone Agent's peculiar abilities and equipment."

"Well," Iliff shrugged, "it worked and here I am, abilities, equipment and all. What was it you found on Lycanno?"

There was considerable evidence to show that, during the years Tahmey was on record as having been about his criminal activities in space, the man named Deel was living quietly on the fourth planet of the Lycanno System, rarely even venturing beyond its atmospheric limits because of a pronounced and distressing liability to the psychosis of space-fear.

Pagadan gathered this evidence partly from official records, partly and in much greater detail from the unconscious memories of some two hundred people who had been more or less intimately connected

with Deel. The investigation appeared to establish his previous existence in Lycanno beyond all reasonable doubt. It did nothing to explain why it should have become merged fantastically with the physical appearance of the pirate Tahmey.

This Deel was remembered as a big, blond, healthy man, good-natured and shrewd, the various details of his features and personality blurred or exaggerated by the untrained perceptions of those who remembered him. The description, particularly after this lapse of time, could have fitted Tahmey just as well—or just as loosely.

It was as far as she could go along that line. Officialdom was lax in Lycanno, and the precise identification of individual citizens by microstructural images or the like was not practiced. Deel had been born there, matured there, become reasonably successful. Then his business was destroyed by an offended competitor, and it was indicated to him that he would not be permitted to re-establish himself in the System.

He had business connections on Gull; and after undergoing a lengthy and expensive conditioning period against the effects of space-fear, he ventured to make the short trip, and was presently working himself back to a position comfortably near the top on Gull.

That was all. Except that—somewhere along the line—his overall physical resemblance to Tahmey had shifted into absolute physical identity. . . .

"I realize, of course, that the duplication of a living personality in another body is considered almost as impossible as the existence of a microstructural double. But it does seem that Tahmey-Deel has to be one or the other."

"Or," Iliff grunted, "something we haven't thought of yet. This is

beginning to look more and more like one of those cases I'd like to forget. Well, what did you do?"

"If there was a biopsychologist in the Lycanno System who had secretly developed a method of personality transfer in some form or other, he was very probably a man of considerable eminence in that line of work. I began to screen the minds of persons likely to know of such a man."

"Did you find him?"

She shook her head and grimaced uncomfortably. "*He found me*--at least, I think we can assume it was he. I assembled some promising leads, a half dozen names in all, and then--I find this difficult to describe--from one moment to another I knew I was being . . . sought . . . by another mind. By a mind of quite extraordinary power, which seemed fully aware of my purpose, of the means I was employing--in fact, of everything except my exact whereabouts at the moment. It was intended to shock me into revealing that--simply by showing me, with that jolting abruptness, how very close I stood to being caught."

"And you didn't reveal yourself?"

"No," she laughed nervously. "But I went 'akaba' instead. I was under it for three days and well on my way back to Gull when I came out of it--as a passenger on a commercial ship! Apparently, I had abandoned my own ship on Lycanno and conducted my escape faultlessly and without hesitation. Successfully, at any rate-- But I remember nothing, of course."

"That was quite a brain chasing you then." Iliff nodded slowly. The akaba condition was a disconcerting defensive trick which had been played on him on occasion by members of other telepathic races. The faculty was common to most of them, completely involuntary, and affected the pursuer more or less as if he had been closing in on a

glow of mental light and suddenly saw that light vanish without a trace.

The Departmental Lab's theory was that under the stress of a psychic attack which was about to overwhelm the individual telepath, a kind of racial Overmind took over automatically and conducted its member-mind's escape from the emergency, if that was at all possible, with complete mechanical efficiency before restoring it to awareness of itself. It was only a theory since the Overmind, if it existed, left no slightest traces of its work--except the brief void of one of the very few forms of complete and irreparable amnesia known. For some reason, as mysterious as the rest of it, the Overmind never intervened if the threatened telepath had been physically located by the pursuer.

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They stared at each other thoughtfully for a moment, then smiled at the same instant.

"Do you believe now," Pagadan challenged, "that this task is worthy of the efforts of a Vegan Zone Agent and his shipload of specialists?"

"I've been afraid of that right along," Iliff said without enthusiasm. "But look, you seem to know a lot more about Galactic Zones than you're really supposed to. Like that business about our shipload of specialists--that kind of information is to be distributed only 'at or above Zone Agent levels.' Where did you pick it up?"

"On Jeltad--above Zone Agent levels," Pagadan replied undisturbed.

"Quite a bit above, as a matter of fact! The occasion was social. And now that I've put you in your place, when do you intend to investigate Deel? I've become casually acquainted with him and could arrange a meeting at almost any time."

liff rubbed his chin. "Well, as to that," he said, "Trader Casselmath dropped in to see a few of Deel's business associates immediately after landing today. They were quite fascinated by the samples of perfume he offered them--he does carry an excellent line of the stuff, you know, though rather high-priced. So Deel turned up too, finally. You'll be interested to hear he's using a new kind of mind-shield now."

She was not surprised. "They were warned, naturally, from Lycanno. The mentality there knew I had been investigating Deel."

"Well, it shows the Brain wasn't able to identify you too closely, because they're waiting for you to pick up your research at this end again. The shield was hair-triggered to give off some kind of alarm. Old Casselmath couldn't be expected to recognize that, of course. He took a poke at it, innocently enough--just trying to find out how far Deel and company could be swindled."

She leaned forward, eyes gleaming black with excitement. "What happened?"

liff shrugged. "Nothing at all obvious. But somebody did come around almost immediately to look Casselmath over. In fact, they pulled his simple mind pretty well wide open, though the old boy never noticed it. Then they knew he was harmless and went away."

Pagadan frowned faintly.

"No," liff said, "it wasn't the Brain. These were stooges, though clever ones--probably the same that were on guard when you probed

Tahmey-Deel the first time. But they've been alerted now, and I don't think we could do any more investigating around Deel without being spotted. After your experience on Lycanno, it seems pretty likely that the answers are all there, anyway."

She nodded slowly. "That's what I think. So we go to Lycanno!"

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liff shook his head. "Just one of us goes," he corrected her. And before her flash of resentment could be voiced he added smoothly, "That's for my own safety as much as for yours. The Brain must have worked out a fairly exact pattern of your surface mentality by now. You couldn't get anywhere near him without being discovered. If we're together, that means I'm discovered, too."

She thought it over, shrugged very humanly and admitted, "I suppose you're right. What am I to do?"

"You're to keep a discreet watch--a very discreet watch--on Deel and his guardians. How Deel manages to be Tahmey, or part of him, at the same time is something the Brain's going to have to explain to us; and if he has a guilty conscience, as he probably has, he may decide to let the evidence disappear. In that case, try to keep a line on where they take Deel--but don't, under any circumstances, take any direct action until I get back from Lycanno."

The black-and-silver eyes studied him curiously. "Isn't that likely to be quite a while?" Pagadan inquired--with such nice control that he almost overlooked the fact that this politically important nonhuman hothead was getting angry again.

"From what we know now of the Brain, he sounds like one of our tougher citizens," he admitted. "Well, yes . . . I might be gone all of two days."

There was a moment of rather tense silence. Then Iliff murmured approvingly:

"See now! I just *knew* you could brake down on that little old temperament."

The Lannai released her breath. "I only hope you're half as good as you think," she said weakly. "But I am almost ready to believe you will do it in two days."

"Oh, I will," Iliff assured her, "with my shipload of specialists." He stood up and looked down at her unsmiling. "So now if you'll give me the information you gathered on those top biopsychologists in Lycanno, I'll be starting."

She nodded amiably. "There are two things I should like to ask you though, before you go. The one is--why have you been trying to probe through my mind-shields all evening?"

"It's a good thing to find out as much as you can about the people you meet in this business," Iliff said without embarrassment. "So many of them aren't really nice. But your shields are remarkably tough. I got hardly any information at all."

"You got nothing!" she said flatly, startled into contradiction.

"Oh, yes. Just a little--when you were giving me that lecture about the Lannai being a proud people and not willing to be protected, and all that. For a moment there you were off guard--"

He brought the captured thought slowly from his mind: the picture of a

quiet, dawnlit city--seas of sloping, ivory-tinted roofs, and towers slender against a flaming sky.

"That is Lar-Sancaya the Beautiful--my city, my home-planet," Pagadan said. "Yes, that was my thought. I remember it now!" She laughed. "You *are* a clever little man, Zone Agent! What information was in that for you?"

liff shrugged. He still showed the form of old Casselmath, the fat, unscrupulous little Terran trader whose wanderings through the galaxy coincided so often with the disappearance of undesirable but hitherto invulnerable citizens, with the inexplicable diversion of belligerent political trends, and the quiet toppling of venal governments. A space-wise, cynical, greedy but somehow ridiculous figure. Very few people ever took Casselmath seriously.

"Well, for one thing that the Lannai are patriots," he said gloomily. "That makes them potentially dangerous, of course. On the whole, I'm rather glad you're on our side."

She grinned cheerfully. "So am I--on the whole. But now, if you'll forgive a touch of malice, which you've quite definitely earned, I'd like the answer to my second question. And that is--what sent that little shock through your nerves when I referred to Tahmey's probable connection with the Ghant Spacers a while ago?"

Old Casselmath rubbed the side of his misformed nose reflectively.

"It's a long, sad story," he said. "But if you want to know--some years back, I set out to nail down the boss of that outfit, the great U-1, no less. That was just after the Confederacy managed to break up the Ghant fleet, you remember-- Well, I finally thought I'd got close enough to him to try a delicate probe at his mind--ugh!"

"I gather you bounced."

"Not nearly fast enough to suit me. The big jerk knew I was after him all the time, and he'd set up a mind-trap for me. Mechanical and highly powered. I had to be helped out of it, and then I was psychoed for six months before I was fit to go back to work.

"That was a long time ago," Casselmath concluded sadly. "But when it comes to U-1, or the Ghant Spacers, or anything at all connected with them, I've just never been the same since."

Pagadan studied her shining nails and smiled sweetly.

"Zone Agent Iliff, I shall bring you the records you want--and you may then run along. From now on, of course, I know exactly what to do to make you *jump*."

• • •

He sat bulky and expressionless at his desk, raking bejeweled fingers slowly through his beard--a magnificent, fan-shaped beard, black, glossy and modishly curled. His eyes were as black as the beard but so curiously lusterless he was often thought to be blind.

For the first time in a long, long span of years, he was remembering the meaning of fear.

But the alien thought had not followed him into the Dome--at least, he could trust his protective devices here. He reached into a section of the flowing black outer garments he wore, and produced a silvery, cone-shaped device. Placing the little amplifier carefully on the desk before him, he settled back in his chair, crossed his hands on his large stomach and half closed his eyes.

Almost immediately the recorded nondirectional thought impulses began. So faint, so impersonal, that even now when he could study their modified traces at leisure, when they did not fade away the instant his attention turned to them, they defied analysis except of the most general kind. And yet the unshielded part of his mind had responded to them, automatically and stupidly, for almost an hour before he realized—

Long enough to have revealed—almost anything!

The gems on his hand flashed furious fire as he whipped the amplifier off the desk and sent it smashing against the wall of the room. It shattered with a tinny crackle and dropped to the floor where a spray of purple sparks popped hissing from its crumpled surfaces and subsided again. The thought-impulses were stilled.

The black-bearded man glared down at the broken amplifier. Then, by almost imperceptible degrees, his expression began to change. Presently, he was laughing silently.

No matter how he had modified and adapted this human brain for his purpose, it remained basically what it had been when he first possessed himself of it. Whenever he relaxed his guidance, it reverted automatically to the old levels of emotional reaction.

He had forced it to develop its every rudimentary faculty until its powers were vastly superior to those of any normal member of its race. No ordinary human being, no matter how highly gifted, could be the equal of one who had had the advantage of becoming host-organism to a parasitizing Ceetal. Not even he, the Ceetal himself, was in any ordinary way the equal of this hypertrophied human intellect—he only controlled it. As a man controls a machine he has designed to be enormously more efficient than himself.

But if he had known the human breed better, he would have selected

a more suitable host from it, to begin with. At its best, this one had been a malicious mediocrity; and its malice only expanded with its powers so that, within the limits he permitted, it now used the mental equipment of a titan to pamper the urges of an ape. A scowling moron who, on the invisible master's demand, would work miracles! Now, at the first suggestion that its omnipotence might be threatened, it turned guilt-ridden and panicky, vacillating between brute fright and brute rages.

Too late to alter that--he was linked to his slave for this phase of his life-cycle. For his purposes, the brute was at any rate adequate, and it often amused him to observe its whims. But for the new Ceetals--for those who would appear after his next Change--he could and would provide more suitable havens.

One of them might well be the spy who had so alarmed his human partner. The shadowy perfection of his mental attack in itself seemed to recommend him for the role.

Meanwhile, however, the spy still had to be caught.

• • •

In swift waves of relaxation, the Ceetal's influence spread through the black-bearded man's body and back into the calming brain. His plan was roughly ready, the trap for the spy outlined, but his human thought-machine was infinitely better qualified for such work.

Controlled now, its personal fears and even the memory of them neutralized, it took up the problem as a problem--swept through it, clarifying, developing, concluding:

It was quite simple. The trap for this spy would be baited with the precise information he sought. On Gull, meanwhile, Tahmey remained as physical bait for the other spy, the first one--the nonhuman mind which had escaped by dint of the instantaneous shock-reflex that plucked it from his grasp as he prepared to close in. That the two were collaborating was virtually certain, that both were emissaries of the Confederacy of Vega was a not too unreasonable conjecture. No other organization suspected of utilizing combat-type minds of such efficiency was also likely to be interested in the person of Tahmey.

He was not, of course, ready to defy the Confederacy as yet--would not be for some time. A new form of concealment for Tahmey might therefore be necessary. But with the two spies under control, with the information extracted from them, any such difficulties could easily be met.

The black-bearded man's hands began to move heavily and unhurriedly over the surface of the desk, activating communicators and recorders.

The plan took shape in a pattern of swift, orderly arrangements.

• • •

Four visitors were waiting for him when he transferred himself to the principal room of the Dome--three men and a woman of the tall handsome Lycannese breed. The four faces turning to him wore the same expression, variously modified, of arrogant impatience.

These and a few others, to all of whom the black-bearded man was

known simply as the Psychologist, had considered themselves for a number of years to be the actual, if unknown, rulers of the Lycannese System. They were very nearly right.

At his appearance, two of them began to speak almost simultaneously.

But they made no intelligible sound.

Outwardly, the black-bearded man had done nothing at all. But the bodies of the four jerked upright in the same instant, as if caught by a current of invisible power. They froze into that attitude, their faces twisted in grotesque terror, while his heavy-lidded, sardonic eyes shifted from one to the other of them.

"Must it always affect you like *that*," he said in friendly reproach, "to realize what I actually am? Or do you feel guilty for having planned to dispose of me, as a once-useful inferior who can no longer further your ambitions?" He paused and studied them again in turn, and the pleasantness went out of his expression.

"Yes, I knew about that little plot," he announced, settling his bulk comfortably on a low couch against the wall. He looked critically at his fingernails. "Normally, I should simply have made its achievement impossible, without letting you find out what had gone wrong. But as things stand, I'm afraid I shall be obliged to dispense with you entirely. I regret it, in a way. Our association has been a useful and amusing one--to me, at least. But, well--"

He shook his head.

"Even I make mistakes," he admitted frankly. "And recent events have made it clear that it was a mistake to involve somewhat ordinary human beings as deeply in my experiments and plans as I involved you--and also that companion of yours, whose absence

here may have caused you to speculate. He," the Psychologist explained good-naturedly, "will outlive you by a day or so." He smiled. "Oddly enough, his brief continued usefulness to me is due to the fact that he is by far the least intelligent of you--so that I had really debated the advisability of dropping him from our little circle before this."

His smile broadened invitingly, but he showed no resentment when none of the chalk-faced, staring puppets before him joined in his amusement.

"Well," he beamed, "enough of this! There are minds on our track who seem capable of reaching you through any defense I can devise. Obviously, I cannot take that risk. Your friend, however, will live long enough to introduce me to one of these minds--another one of your ever-surprising species--who should eventually be of far greater value to me than any of you could hope to be. Perhaps even as valuable as the person you know as Tahmey. Let that thought console you in your last moments--which," he concluded, glancing at a pearly oblong that was acquiring a shimmering visibility in the wall behind the four Lycannese, "are now at hand."

Two solidly built men came into the room through the oblong, saluted, and waited.

The black-bearded one gave them a genial nod and jerked his thumb in the general direction of the motionless little group of his disposed associates.

"Strangle those four," he said, "in turn--"

He looked on for a few moments but then grew bored. Rising from the couch, he walked slowly toward one of the six walls of the room. It began to turn transparent as he approached, and when he stood before it the port-city of Lycanno iv, the greatest city in the Lycannese

System, was clearly visible a few thousand feet below.

He gazed down at the scene almost affectionately, savoring a mood of rich self-assurance. For he was, as he had just now proved once more, the city's absolute master--master of the eight million human beings who lived there; of the two billion on the planet; of the sixteen billion in the System. Not for years had his mastery been seriously challenged.

His lusterless black eyes shifted slowly to Lycanno's two suns, moving now toward their evening horizon. Scattered strategically through the galaxy, nearly a thousand such suns lighted as many planetary systems, each of which was being gathered slowly into a Ceetal's grasp. The black-bearded man did not entertain the delusion that Lycanno by itself was an important conquest--no more than each of those other fractional human civilizations. But when the time came finally--

He permitted himself to lapse into a reverie of galactic conquest. But curiously, it was now the human brain and mind which indulged itself in this manner. The parasite remained lightly detached, following the imaginings without being affected by them, alert for some new human foible which it might turn some day to Ceetal profit.

It was, the Ceetal realized again, an oddly complicated organism, the human one. His host fully understood the relationship between them, and his own subordinate part in the Ceetal's plans. Yet he never let himself become conscious of the situation and frequently appeared to feel an actual identity with the parasite. It was strange such a near-maniac species could have gained so dominant a position in this galaxy.

There was a sudden minor commotion in the center of the room, harsh snoring sounds and then a brief, frenzied drumming of heels on the carpeted floor.

"You are getting careless," the Psychologist said coldly, without turning his head. "Such things can be done quietly."

• • •

The small yellow-faced man with the deep-set amber eyes drew a good number of amused and curious stares during the two days he was registered at the Old Lycannese Hotel.

He expected nothing else. Even in such sophisticated and galactic-minded surroundings, his appearance was fantastic to a rather indecent degree. The hairless dome of his head sloped down comically into a rounded snout. He was noseless and apparently earless, and in animated moments his naked yellow scalp would twitch vigorously like the flanks of some vermin-bitten beast.

However, the Old Lycannese harbored a fair selection of similarly freakish varieties of humanity within its many-storied walls--mutant humanity from worlds that were, more often than not, only nameless symbols on any civilized star-map. Side by side with them, indistinguishable to the average observer, representatives of the rarer humanoid species also came and went--on the same quest of profitable trade with Lycanno.

The yellow-faced man's grotesqueness, therefore, served simply to classify him. It satisfied curiosity almost as quickly as it drew attention; and no one felt urged to get too sociable with such a freak. Whether mutant human or humanoid, he was, at any rate, solvent and had shown a taste for quiet luxury. The hotel saw that he got what he wanted, pocketed his money and bothered its managerial head no further about him.

This curiosity-distracting effect, the yellow-faced man considered, as he strolled across the ground-floor lobby, was almost as satisfactory when it was applied to those who had reason to take a much sharper practical interest in any stranger! Two members of the Psychologist's bodyguard, behind whom he was heading toward an open elevator which led to the roof-terraces, had scrutinized him swiftly in passing a moment before--but only long enough to re-establish his identity beyond any doubt. They had checked that in detail the previous day--a Talpu, Humanoid, from a system of the Twenty-eighth Median Cluster, dealing in five varieties of gems--three of them previously unknown to Lycanno. Queer-looking little duck, but quite harmless.

The Psychologist's bodyguards took few chances, but they were not conditioned to look for danger in so blatantly obvious a shape.

The Psychologist himself, whose dome-shaped dwelling topped one section of the Old Lycannese Hotel, was taking no chances at all these days.

From the center of the moving cluster of his henchmen he gave the trailing humanoid's mind a flicking probe and encountered a mind-shield no different than was to be expected in a traveler with highly valuable commercial secrets to preserve--a shield he could have dissolved in an instant with hardly any effort at all.

However, so sudden an operation would have entailed leaving a small yellow maniac gibbering in agony on the floor of the lobby behind him--a complication he preferred to avoid in public. He dropped the matter from his thoughts, contemptuously. He knew of the Talpu--a base, timid race, unfit even for slavery.

A secondary and very different shield, which the more obvious first one had concealed from the Psychologist's probe, eased cautiously again in the yellow-faced man's mind, while the Talpu surface

thoughts continued their vague quick traceries over both shields, unaffected either by the probe or by the deeper reaction it had aroused.

As the Psychologist's group reached the automatic elevator, the humanoid was almost side by side with its rearmost members and only a few steps behind the dignitary himself. There the party paused briefly while one of the leading guards scanned the empty compartment, and then stood aside to let the Psychologist enter. That momentary hesitation was routine procedure. The yellow-faced man had calculated with it, and he did not pause with the rest--though it was almost another half-second before any of the Psychologist's watch-dogs realized that *something* had just passed with a shadowy unobtrusiveness through their ranks.

By then, it was much too late. The great man had just stepped ponderously into the elevator; and the freakish little humanoid, now somehow directly behind him, was entering on his heels.

Simultaneously, he performed two other motions, almost casually.

. . .

As his left hand touched the switch that started the elevator on its way to the roof, a wall of impalpable force swung up and outwards from the floor-sill behind him, checking the foremost to hurl themselves at this impossible intruder--much more gently than if they had run into a large feather cushion but also quite irresistibly. The hotel took no chances of having its patrons injured on its premises; so the shocked bodyguards simply found themselves standing outside the elevator again before they realized it had flashed upward

into its silvery shaft.

As it began to rise, the yellow-faced man completed his second motion. This was to slip a tiny hypodermic needle into the back of the Psychologist's neck and depress its plunger.

One could not, of course, openly abduct the system's most influential citizen without arousing a good deal of hostile excitement. But he had, Iliff calculated, when the elevator stopped opposite his apartments near the top of the huge hotel, a margin of nearly thirty seconds left to complete his getaway before any possible counterattack could be launched. There was no need to hurry.

A half dozen steps took him from the elevator into his rooms, the Psychologist walking behind him with a look of vague surprise on his bearded face. Another dozen steps brought the two out to an open-air platform where a rented fast planecar was waiting.

At sixty thousand feet altitude, Iliff checked the spurt of their vertical ascent and turned north. The land was darkening with evening about the jewel-like sparkle of clustered seaboard cities, but up here the light of Lycanno's primary sun still glittered greenly from the car's silver walls. The speeding vehicle was shielded for privacy from all but official spy-rays, and for several more minutes he would have no reason to fear those. Meanwhile, any aerial pursuer who could single him out from among the myriad similar cars streaming into and out of the port city at that hour would be very good indeed.

Stripping the vivo-gel masks carefully from his head and hands, he dropped the frenziedly twitching half-alive stuff into the depository beside his seat where the car's jets would destroy it.

The Psychologist sat, hunched forward and docile, beside him--dull black eyes staring straight ahead. So far, the new Vegan mind-lock was conforming to the Third Co-ordinator's expectations.

• • •

Interrogation of the prisoner took place in a small valley off the coast of an uninhabited island, in the sub-polar regions. A dozen big snake-necked carnivores scattered from the carcass of a still larger thing on which they had been feeding as the planecar settled down; and their snuffing and baffled howls provided a background for the further proceedings which Iliff found grimly fitting. He had sent out a fear-impulse adjusted to the beast-pack's primitive sensation-level, which kept them prowling helplessly along the rim of a hundred-yard circle.

In the center of this circle Iliff sat cross-legged on the ground, watching the Quizzer go about its business.



The Quizzer was an unbeautiful two-foot cube of machine. Easing itself with delicate ruthlessness through the Psychologist's mental defenses, it droned its findings step by step into Liff's mind. He could have done the work without its aid, since the shield had never been developed that could block a really capable investigator if he was otherwise unhampered. But it would have taken a great deal longer; and at best he did not expect to have more time than he needed to extract the most vital points of information. Besides, he lacked the Quizzer's sensitivity; if he was hurried, there was a definite risk of

doing irreparable injury to the mind under investigation--at that stage, he hadn't been able to decide whether or not it would be necessary to kill the Psychologist.

The second time the Quizzer contacted the Ceetal, he knew. The little robot reported an alien form of awareness which came and went through the Quizzer's lines of search as it chose and was impossible to localize.

"It is the dominant consciousness in this subject. But it is connected with the organism only through the other one."

The Quizzer halted again. It was incapable of surprise or confusion, but when it could not classify what it found it stopped reporting. It was bothered, too, by the effects of the mind-lock--an innovation to which it was not adjusted. The chemical acted directly on the shields, freezing those normally flexible defensive patterns into interlocked nets of force which isolated the energy centers of the nervous system that produced them.

"Give me anything you get on it!" Iliff urged.

The machine still hesitated. And then:

"It thinks that if it could break the force you call the mind-lock and energize the organism it could kill you instantly. But it is afraid that it would cause serious injury to the organism in doing so. Therefore it is willing to wait until its friends arrive and destroy you. It is certain that this will happen very quickly now."

Iliff grunted. That was no news to him, but it gave him an ugly thrill nevertheless. He'd found it necessary to cut his usual hit-and-run tactics very fine for this job; and so far he had got nothing he could use out of it.

"Does this primary consciousness," he inquired, "know what you're

trying to do and what you're telling me?"

"It knows what I'm trying to do," the machine responded promptly. "It does not know that I'm telling you anything. It is aware of your presence and purpose but it can receive no sense impression of any kind. It can only think."

"Good enough," Iliff nodded. "It can't interfere with your activity then?"

"Not while the mind-lock keeps it from arousing its energy sources."

"What of the other one--the human consciousness?"

"That one is somnolent and completely helpless. It is barely aware of what is occurring and has made no attempt to interfere. It is only the mind-lock that blocks my approach to the information you require. If you could dissolve that force, there would be no difficulty."

Iliff wasted a baleful look on his squat assistant. "Except," he pointed out, "that I'd get killed!"

"Undoubtedly," the machine agreed with idiotic unconcern. "The energy centers of this organism are overdeveloped to an extent which, theoretically, should have drained it of its life-forces many years ago. It appears that the alien consciousness is responsible both for the neural hypertrophy and for the fact that the organism as a whole has been successfully adapted to meet the resultant unnatural stresses."

• • •

Towards the end of the next half-hour, the pattern of information

finally began to take definite shape--a shape that made Iliff increasingly anxious to get done with the job. But which showed also that the Third Co-ordinator's hunch had been better than he knew!

Lycanno was long overdue for a Zone Agent's attentions.

He should, he supposed, have been elated; instead, he was sweating and shivering, keyed to nightmarish tensions. Theoretically, the mind-lock might be unbreakable, but the Ceetal, for one, did not believe it. It did fear that to shatter lock and shields violently might destroy its host and thereby itself; so far, that had kept it from making the attempt. That, and the knowledge it shared with its captor--that they could not remain undiscovered much longer.

But at each new contact, the Quizzer unemotionally reported an increase in the gathering fury and alarm with which the parasite observed the progress of the investigation. It had been coldly contemptuous at first; then the realization came slowly that vital secrets *were* being drawn, piece by piece, from the drugged human mind to which it was linked--and that it could do nothing to check the process.

By now, it was dangerously close to utter frenzy, and for many minutes Iliff's wrist-gun had been trained on the hunched and motionless shape of the Psychologist. Man and Ceetal would die on the spot if necessary. But even in its death-spasms, he did not want to be in the immediate neighborhood of that mind and the powers it could unleash if it broke loose. Time and again, he drew the Quizzer back from a line of investigation that seemed too likely to provide the suicidal impulse. Other parts of the pattern had been gained piecemeal, very circumstantially.

It was tight, carefully balanced work. However, there were only a few more really important points left now. There might be just time enough--

liff jerked upright as a warning blared from an automatic detector he had installed in the planecar the day before, raising a chorus of furious carnivore yells from the rim of the hundred-yard fear-circle.

"Two planetary craft approaching at low cruising speeds," it detailed. "Sector fourteen, distance eighty-five miles, altitude nineteen miles. Surface and psyche scanners are being used."

And, an instant later:

"You have been discovered!"

The rescuers were several minutes earlier than he'd actually expected. But the warning gave him the exact margin required for his next action, and the uncertainty and tension vanished from his mind.

He snapped a command to the Quizzer:

"Release the subject--then destroy yourself!"

Freed from invisible tentacles, the Psychologist's body rolled clumsily forward to the turf, and at once came stumbling to its feet. Behind it, the Quizzer flared up briefly in a shower of hissing sparks, collapsed, liquefied, and fused again into metallic formlessness.

Seconds later, liff had lifted the planecar over the valley's tree-top level. The vehicle's visiglobe was focused locally--every section of the dark little valley appeared as distinct in it as if flooded with brilliant daylight. Near its center, the figure of the Psychologist was groping through what, to him, was near-complete blackness down into the open ground. Whether the alien mind understood that its men had arrived and was attempting to attract their attention, liff would never know.

It did not matter, now. The planecar's concealed guns were trained

on that figure; and his finger was on the trigger-stud.

But he did not fire. Gliding out from under the trees, the lean, mottled shapes of the carnivore-pack had appeared in the field of the globe. Forgetting the intangible barrier of fear as quickly as it ceased to exist, they scuttled back towards their recently abandoned feast--and swerved, in a sudden new awareness, to converge upon the man-form that stumbled blindly about near it.

Iliff grimaced faintly, spun the visiglobe to wide-range focus and sent the planecar hurtling over the shoreline into the sea. The maneuver would shield him from the surface scanners of the nearest pursuers and give him a new and now urgently needed headstart.

It would please his scientific colleagues back on Jeltad, he knew, to hear that the Ceetal had been mistaken about the strength of their mind-lock. For the brief seconds it survived in the center of the ravening mottled pack, that malevolent intellect must have put forth every effort to break free and destroy its attackers.

It had been quite unsuccessful.

. . .

Near dawn, in the fifth-largest city of Lycanno iv, a smallish military gentleman proceeded along the docks of a minor space port towards a large, slow-looking, but apparently expensive craft he had registered there two days before. Under one arm he carried a bulging brief case of the openly spy-proof type employed by officials of the Terran embassy.

The burden did not detract in the least from his air of almost belligerent dignity--an attitude which still characterized most citizens of ancient Earth in the afterglow of her glory. The ship he approached was surrounded by a wavering, globular sheen of light, like a cluster of multiple orange halos, warning dock attendants and the idly curious from coming within two hundred feet of it.

Earthmen were notoriously jealous of their right to privacy.

The military gentleman, whose size was his only general point of resemblance to either Iliff or the yellow-faced man who had been a guest of the Old Lycannese Hotel not many hours earlier, walked into the area of orange fire without hesitation. From the ship, a brazen, inhuman voice boomed instantly at him, both audibly and in mental shock-waves that would have rocked the average intruder back like a blow in the face:

"Withdraw at once! This vessel is shielded from investigation in accordance with existing regulations. Further unauthorized advance into the area defined by the light-barrier--"

The voice went silent suddenly. Then it continued, subvocally:

"You are being observed from a strato-station. Nothing else to report. We can leave immediately."

In the strato-station, eighty miles above, a very young, sharp-faced fleet lieutenant was turning to his captain:

"Couldn't that be--?"

The captain gave him a sardonic, worldly-wise smile.

"No, Junior," he said mildly, "that could not be. That, as you should recall, is Colonel Perritaph, recently attached to the Terran Military Commission. We checked him through this port yesterday morning.

But," he added, "we're going to have a little fun with the colonel. As soon as he's ready to take off, he'll drop that light-barrier. When he does, spear him with a tractor and tell him he's being held for investigation, because there's a General Emergency out."

"Why not do it now? Oh!"

"You catch on, Junior--you do catch on," his superior approved tolerantly. "No light-barrier is to be monkeyed with, ever! Poking a tractor-beam into one *may* do no harm. On the other hand, it may blow up the ship, the docks, or, just possibly, our cozy little station up here--all depending on what stuff happens to be set how. But once the colonel's inside and has the crate under control, he's not going to blow up anything, even if we do hurt his tender Terran feelings a bit."

"That way we find out what he's got in the ship, diplomatic immunity or not," the lieutenant nodded, trying to match the captain's air of weary omniscience.

"We're not interested in what's in the ship," the captain said softly, abashing him anew. "Terra's a couple of hundred years behind us in construction and armaments--always was." This was not strictly true; but the notion was a popular one in Lycanno, which had got itself into a brief, thunderous argument with the aging Mother of Galactic Mankind five hundred years before and limped for a century and a half thereafter. The unforeseen outcome had, of course, long since been explained--rotten luck and Terran treachery--and the whole regrettable incident was not often mentioned nowadays.

But, for a moment, the captain glowered down in the direction of the distant spaceport, unaware of what moved him to malice.

"We'll just let him squirm around a bit and howl for his rights," he murmured. "They're so beautifully sensitive about those precious privileges!"



There was a brief pause while both stared at the bulky-looking ship in their globe.

"Wonder what that g.e. really went out for," the lieutenant ventured presently.

"To catch one humanoid ape--as described," the captain grinned. Then he relented. "I'll tell you one thing--it's big enough that they've put out the Fleet to blast anyone who tries to sneak off without being

identified."

The lieutenant tried to look as if that explained it, but failed. Then he brightened and announced briskly: "The guy's barrier just went off!"

"All right. Give him the tractor!"

"It's--"

Up from the dock area then, clearly audible through their instruments, there rose a sound: a soft but tremendous *whoosh!* The cradle in which the slow-looking ship had rested appeared to quiver violently. Nothing else changed. But the ship was no longer there.

In white-faced surprise, the lieutenant goggled at the captain. "Did . . . did it blow up?" he whispered.

The captain did not answer. The captain had turned purple, and seemed to be having the worst kind of trouble getting his breath.

"Took off--*under space-drive!*" he gasped suddenly. "How'd he do that without wrecking-- With a tractor on him!"

He whirled belatedly, and flung himself at the communicators. Gone was his aplomb, gone every trace of worldly-wise weariness.

"Station 1222 calling Fleet!" he yelled. "Station 1222 calling--"

. . .

While Lycanno's suns shrank away in the general-view tank before him, Iliff rapidly sorted the contents of his brief case into a small

multiple-recorder. It had been a busy night--to those equipped to read the signs the Fourth Planet must have seemed boiling like a hive of furious bees before it was over! But he'd done most of what had seemed necessary, and the pursuit never really got within minutes of catching up with him again.

When the excitement died down, Lycanno would presently discover it had become a somewhat cleaner place overnight. For a moment, Iliff wished he could be around when the real Colonel Perritaph began to express his views on the sort of police inefficiency which had permitted an impostor to make use of his name and position in the System.

Terra's embassies were always ready to give a representative of the Confederacy a helping hand, and no questions asked; just as, in any all-out war, its tiny, savage fleet was regularly found fighting side by side with the ships of Vega--though never exactly together with them. Terra was no member of the Confederacy; it was having no foreigners determine its policies. On the whole, the Old Planet had not changed so very much.

When Iliff set down the empty brief case, the voice that had addressed him on his approach to the ship spoke again. As usual, it was impossible to say from just where it came; but it seemed to boom out of the empty air a little above Iliff's head. In spite of its curious resemblance to his own voice, most people would have identified it now as the voice of a robot.

Which it was--for its size the most complicated robot-type the science of Vega and her allies had yet developed.

"Two armed space-craft, Lycannese destroyer-type, attempting interception!" it announced. After the barest possible pause, it added: "Instructions?"

liff grinned a little without raising his head. No one else would have noticed anything unusual in the stereotyped warning, but he had been living with that voice for some fifteen years.

"Evasion, of course, you big ape!" he said softly. "You'll have had all the fighting you want before you're scrapped."

His grin widened then, at a very convincing illusion that the ship had shrugged its sloping and monstrosly armored shoulders in annoyed response. That, however, was due simply to the little leap with which the suns of Lycanno vanished from the tank in the abruptness of full forward acceleration.

In effect, the whole ship was the robot--a highly modified version of the deadly one-man strike-ships of the Vegan battle fleet, but even more heavily armed and thus more than qualified to take on a pair of Lycannese destroyers for the split-second maneuverings and decisions, the whole slashing frenzy of a deep-space fight. Its five central brains were constructed to produce, as closely as possible, replicas of liff's own basic mental patterns, which made for a nearly perfect rapport. Beyond that, of course, the machine was super-sensed and energized into a truly titanic extension of the man.

liff did not bother to observe the whiplash evasion tactics which almost left the destroyers' commanders wondering whether there had been any unidentified spaceship recorded on their plates in the first place. That order was being carried out much more competently than if he had been directing the details himself; and meanwhile there was other business on hand--the part of his job he enjoyed perhaps least of all. A transmitter was driving the preliminary reports of his actions on Lycanno Four across nearly half the galaxy to G.Z. Headquarters Central on the planet of Jeltad.

There, clerks were feeding it, in series with a few thousand other current intermission reports, into more complex multiple-recorders,

from which various sections were almost instantaneously disgorged, somewhat cut and edited.

. . .

"She has not responded to her personal beam," the robot announced for the second time.

"Sure she just wasn't able to get back at us?"

"There is no indication of that."

"Keep it open then--until she does answer," Iliff said. Personal telepathy at interstellar ranges was always something of an experiment, unless backed at both ends by mechanical amplifiers of much greater magnitude than were at Pagadan's disposal.

"But I do wish," he grumbled, "I'd been able to find out what made the Ceetal so particularly interested in Tahmey! Saving him up, as host, for the next generation, of course. If he hadn't been so touchy on that point--" He scowled at the idly clicking transmitter before him. Deep down in his mind, just on the wrong side of comprehension, something stirred slowly and uneasily and sank out of his awareness again.

"Correlation ought to call in pretty soon," he reassured himself. "With the fresh data we've fed them, they'll have worked out a new line on the guy."

"Departmental Lab is now attempting to get back on transmitter," the robot informed him. "Shall I blank them out till you've talked with Correlation?"

"Let them through," Iliff sighed. "If we have to, we'll cut them off--"

A staccato series of clicks conveying an impression of agitated inquiry, rose suddenly from the transmitter. Still frowning, he adjusted light-scales, twisted knobs, and a diminutive voice came gushing in mid-speech from the instrument. Iliff listened a while; then he broke in impatiently.

"Look," he explained, "I've homed you the full recorded particulars of the process they used. You'll have the stuff any minute now, and you'll get a lot more out of that than I could tell you. The man I got it from was the only one still alive of the group that did the job; but he was the one that handled the important part--the actual personality transfer.

"I cleared his mind of all he knew of the matter and recorded it, but all I understood myself was the principle involved--if that."

The voice interjected a squeaky, rapid-fire protest. Iliff cut in again quickly:

"Well, if you need it now-- You're right about there not having been any subjective switching of personalities involved, and I'm not arguing about whether it's impossible. These people just did a pretty complete job of shifting everything that's supposed to make up a conscious individual from one human body to another. From any objective point of view, it *looks* like a personality transfer.

"No, they didn't use psychosurgery," he went on. "Except to fill in a six-months' sequence of memory tracts to cover the interval they had Tahmey under treatment. What they used was a modification of the electronic method of planting living reflex patterns in robot brains. First, they blanked out Tahmey's mind completely--neutralized all established neural connections and so on, right down to the primary

automatic reflexes."

"The 'no-mind' stage?" Lab piped.

"That's right. Then they put the Lycannese Deel in a state of mental stasis. They'd picked him because of his strong physical resemblance to Tahmey."

"That," Lab instructed him sharply, "could have no effect on the experiment as such. Did they use a chemical paralyzing agent to produce the stasis?"

"I think so. It's in the report--"

"You--Zone Agents! How long did they keep the two nerve systems linked?"

"About six months."

"I see. Then they broke the flow and had a *complete* copy of the second subject's neural impulse paths stamped into the first subject's nervous system. Re-energized, the artificial personality would pick up at the exact point it entered mental stasis and continue to develop normally from there on. I see, I see, I see . . . but what happened to the second subject--Deel?"

"He died in convulsions a few seconds after they returned him to consciousness."

Lab clicked regretfully. "Usual result of a prolonged state of mental stasis--and rather likely to limit the usefulness of the process, you know. Now, there are a few important points--"

"Correlation!" the robot said sharply into Iliff's mind.

The squeaky voice thinned into an abrupt high whistle and was gone.

• • •

"I'm here, Iiff! Your friend and guide, Captain Rashallan of Correlation, himself. You haven't started to close in on that Tahmey bird yet, have you? You aren't anywhere near him yet?"

"No," Iiff said. He squinted down at the transmitter and was surprised by a sudden sense of constriction in his throat. "Why?"

The Correlation man took about three minutes to tell him. He ended with:

"We've just had a buzz from Lab—they were trying to get back to you, but couldn't—and what they want us to tell you fits right in—

"The neutralization of a nervous system that produces the no-mind stage is an effect that wears off completely within two years. Normally, the result is the gradual re-establishment of the original personality; but, in this case, there can be no such result because all energy centers are channeling constantly into the Deel personality.

"*However*, there's no reason to doubt that 'Tahmey' is now also present in the system—though unconscious and untraceable because unenergized. Obviously, the Ceetal could have no reason to be interested in a commonplace mentality such as Deel's.

"Now you see how it ties in! Whether it was the Ceetal's intention or not—and it's extremely probable, a virtual certainty, that it was—the whole artificial creation remains stable only so long as the Deel personality continues to function.

"The instant it lapses, the original personality will be energized. You see what's likely to happen to any probing outsider then?"

"Yes," Iiff said, "I see."

"Assuming it's been arranged like that," said Captain Rashallan, "the trigger that sets off the change is, almost certainly, a situational one--and there will be a sufficient number of such triggered situations provided so that any foreseeable emergency pattern is bound to develop one or more of them.

"The Ceetal's purpose with such last-resort measures would be, of course, to virtually insure the destruction of any investigator who had managed to overcome his other defenses, and who was now at the point of getting a direct line on *him* and his little pals.

"So you'll have to watch . . . well, Zones wants to get through to you now, and they're getting impatient. Good luck, Iiff!"

Iiff leaned forward then and shut off the transmitter. For a moment or so after that, he sat motionless, his yellow eyes staring with a hard, flat expression at something unseen. Then he inquired:

"Did you get Pagadan?"

"There've been several blurred responses in the past few minutes," the robot answered. "Apparently, she's unable to get anything beyond the fact that you *are* trying to contact her--and she is also unable to amplify her reply to the extent required just now. Do you have any definite message?"

"Yes," Iiff said briskly. "As long as you get any response from her at all, keep sending her this: 'Kill Tahmey! Get off Gull!' Make it verbal and strong. Even if the beam doesn't clear, that much might get through."

"There's a very good chance of it," the robot agreed. It added, after a moment, "But the Interstellar operative is not very likely to be successful in either undertaking, liff."

There was another pause before liff replied.

"No," he said then. "I'm afraid not. But she's a capable being--she does have a chance."

• • •

For Distribution At and Above Zone Agent Levels

Description: . . . mind-parasite of extragalactic origin, accidentally introduced into our Zones and now widely scattered there. . . . In its free state a nonmaterial but coherent form of conscious energy, characterized by high spatial motility.

. . . basic i.q. slightly above a-type human being. Behavior . . . largely on reflex-intuition levels. The basic procedures underlying its life-cycle are not consciously comprehended by the parasite and have not, at present, been explained.

Cycle: . . . the free state, normally forming only a fraction of the Ceetal life-cycle, may be extended indefinitely until the parasite contacts a suitable host-organism. Oxygen-breathing life-forms with neural mechanisms in the general class of the human nervous

system and its energy areas serve this purpose.

On contacting a host, the Ceetal undergoes changes in itself enabling it to control the basic energizing drives of the host-organism. It then develops the host's neural carriers to a constant point *five times* beyond the previous absolute emergency overload.

In type-case Ceetal-Homo-Lycanno S-4, 1782--a drastic localized hypertrophy of the central nerve tissue masses was observed, indicating protective measures against the overload induced in the organism.

The advantages to the parasite of developing a host-organism of such abnormal potency and efficiency in its environment are obvious, as it is indissolubly linked to its host for the major part of its long parasitic stage and cannot survive the host's death. Barring accidents or superior force, it is, however, capable of prolonging the host's biological life-span almost indefinitely.

At the natural end of this stage, the Ceetal reproduces, the individual parasite dividing into eight free-stage forms. The host is killed in the process of division, and each Ceetal is freed thereby to initiate a new cycle.

Chief G.Z.: From Correlation

F. The numerical strength of the original swarm of free-stage Ceetals can thus be set at approximately forty-nine thousand. The swarm first contacted the Toeller Planet and, with the exception of less than a thousand individuals, entered symbiosis with the highest life-form

evolved there.

The resultant emergence of the "Toeller-Worm," previously regarded as the most remarkable example known of spontaneous mental evolution in a species, is thereby explained. The malignant nature of the Super-Toeller mirrors the essentially predatory characteristics of the Ceetal. Its complete extermination by our forces involved the destruction of the entire Ceetal swarm, excepting the individuals which had deferred adopting a host.

G. Practical chances of a similar second swarm of these parasites contacting our galaxy are too low to permit evaluation.

H. The threat from the comparatively few remaining Ceetals derives from the survivors' decision to select their hosts only from civilized species with a high basic i.q., capable of developing and maintaining a dominating influence throughout entire cultural systems.

In the type-case reported, the Ceetal not only secured a complete political dominance of the Class-Twelve System of Lycanno but extended its influence into three neighboring systems.

Since all surviving Ceetals maintain contact with each other and the identity and location of one hundred and eighteen of these survivors was given in the Agent's report, it should not be too difficult to dispose of them before their next period of reproduction—which would, of course, permit the parasite to disperse itself to a dangerous extent throughout the galaxy.

The operation cannot be delayed, however, as the time of reproduction for the first Ceetals to adopt hosts of human-level i.q.

following the destruction of the Toeller-Worms can now be no more than between two and five years--standard--in the future. The danger is significantly increased, of course, by their more recent policy of selecting and conserving hosts of *abnormally* high i.q. rating well in advance of the "change."

The menace to civilization from such beings, following their mental hypertrophy and under Ceetal influence, can hardly be overstated.

The problem of disposing of all surviving Ceetals--or, failing that, of all such prospective super-hosts--must therefore be considered one of utmost urgency.

. . .

"They're telling me!" the Third Co-ordinator said distractedly. He rubbed his long chin, and reached for a switch.

"Psych-tester?" he said. "You heard them? What are the chances of some other Ceetal picking up U-1?"

"It must be assumed," a mechanical voice replied, "that the attempt will be made promptly. The strike you have initiated against those who were revealed by the Agent's report cannot prevent some unknown survivor from ordering U-1's removal to another place of concealment, where he could be picked up at will. Since you are counting on a lapse of two days before the strike now under way will have yielded sufficient information to permit you to conclude the operation against the Ceetals, several of them may succeed in organizing their escape--and even a single Ceetal in possession of such a host as U-1 would indicate the eventual dominance of the

species. Galactic Zones has no record of any other mentality who would be even approximately so well suited to their purposes."

"Yes," said the Co-ordinator. "Their purposes--you think then if U-1 got their treatment, being what he is, he could take us?"

"Yes," the voice said. "He could."

The Co-ordinator nodded thoughtfully. His face looked perhaps a little harsher, a little grayer than usual.

"Well, we've done what we can from here," he said presently. "The first *other* Agent will get to Gull in eleven hours, more or less. There'll be six of them there tomorrow. And a fleet of destroyers within call range--none of them in time to do much good, I'm afraid!"

"That is the probability," the voice agreed.

"Zone Agent Iliff has cut communication with us," the Co-ordinator went on. "Correlation informed him they had identified Tahmey as U-1. He would be, I suppose, proceeding at top velocities to Gull?"

"Yes, naturally."

"Interstellar reports they have not been able to contact their operative on Gull. It appears," the Co-ordinator concluded, rather bleakly, "that Zone Agent Iliff understands the requirements of the situation."

"Yes," the voice said, "he does."

• • •

"G.Z. Headquarters is still trying to get through," the robot said. After a moment, it added, "liff, this is no longer a one-agent mission."

"You're right about that! Half the Department's probably blowing its jets trying to converge on Gull right now. They'll get there a little late, though. Meanwhile they know what we know, or as much of it as is good for them. How long since you got the last sign from Pagadan?"

"Over two hours."

liff was silent a moment. "You might as well quit working her beam," he said finally. "But keep it open, just in case. And pour on that power till we get to Gull!"

It did not take long after his landing on that planet to establish with a reasonable degree of certainty that if Pagadan was still present, she was in no condition to respond to any kind of telepathic message. It was only a very little later--since he was working on the assumption that caution was not a primary requirement just now--before he disclosed the much more significant fact that the same held true of the personage who had been known as Deel.

The next hour, however--until he tapped the right three or four minds--was a dragging nightmare. Then he had the additional information that the two he sought had departed from the planet, together, but otherwise unaccompanied, not too long after he had sent Pagadan his original message.

He flashed the information back to the docked ship, adding:

"It's a question, of course, of who took whom along. My own guess is Pagadan hadn't tripped any triggers yet and was still in charge--and U-1 was still Deel--when they left here. The ship's a single-pilot yacht, shop-new, fueled for a fifty-day trip. No crew; no destination recorded.

"Pass it on to Headquarters right away! They still won't be able to do anything about it; but anyway, it's an improvement."

"That's done," the robot returned impassively. "And now?"

"I'm getting back to you at speed--we're going after them, of course."

"She must have got the message," the robot said after a moment, "but not clearly enough to realize exactly what you wanted. How did she do it?"

"Nobody here seems to know--she blasted those watch-dogs in one sweep, and Gull's been doing flip-flops quietly ever since. The Ceetal's gang is in charge of the planet, of course, and they think Deel and his kidnapers are still somewhere around. They've just been alerted from Lycanno that something went wrong *there* in a big way; but again they don't know what.

"And now they've also begun to suspect somebody's been poking around in their minds pretty freely this last hour or so."

• • •

The two men in the corridor outside the Port Offices were using mind-shields of a simple but effective type. It was the motor tension in their nerves and muscles that warned him first, surging up as he approached, relaxing slightly--but only slightly--when he was past.

He drove the warning to the ship.

"Keep an open line of communication between us, and look out for

yourself. The hunt's started up at this end!"

"The docks are clear of anything big enough to matter," the robot returned instantly. "I'm checking upstairs. How bad does it look? I can be with you in three seconds from here."

"You'd kill a few thousand bystanders doing it, big boy! This section's built up. Just stay where you are. There are two men following me, a bunch more waiting behind the next turn of this corridor. All wearing mind-shields--looks like government police."

A second later: "They're set to use paralyzers, so there's no real danger. The Ceetal's outfit wants me alive, for questioning."

"What will you do?"

"Let them take me. It's you they're interested in! Lycanno's been complaining about us, and they think we might be here to get Deel and the Lannai off the planet. How does it look around you now?"

"Quiet, but not good! There're some warships at extreme vision range where they can't do much harm; but too many groups of men within two hundred miles of us are wearing mind-shields and waiting for something. I'd say they're ready to use fixed-mount space guns now, in case we try to leave without asking again."

"That would be it-- Well, here go the paralyzers!"

He stepped briskly around the corridor corner and stopped short, rigid and transfixed in flickering white fountains of light that spouted at him from the nozzles of paralyzer guns in the hands of three of the eight men waiting there.

After a fifth of a second, the beams snapped off automatically. The stiffness left liiff's body more slowly; he slumped then against the wall and slid to the floor, sagging jaw drawing his face down into an

expression of foolish surprise.

One of the gunmen stepped towards him, raised his head and pried up an eyelid.

"He's safe!" he announced with satisfaction. "He'll stay out as long as you want him that way."

Another man spoke into a wristphone.

"Got him! Orders?"

"Get him into the ambulance waiting at the main entrance of the building!" a voice crackled back. "Take him to Dock 709. We've got to investigate that ship, and we'll need him to get inside."

"Thought it would be that," Iliff's murmur reached the ship. "They'll claim I was in an accident or something and ask to bring me in." The thought trailed off, started up again a moment later: "They might as well be using sieves as those government-issue mind-shields! These boys here don't know another thing except that I'm wanted, but we can't afford to wait any longer. We'll have to take them along. Get set to leave as soon as we're inside!"

The eight men who brought him through the ship's ground lock--six handling his stretcher, two following helpfully--were of Gull's toughest; an alert, well-trained and well-armed group, prepared for almost any kind of trouble. However, they never had a chance.



The lock closed soundlessly, but instantaneously, on the heels of the last of them. From the waiting ambulance and a number of other camouflaged vehicles outside concealed semi-portables splashed wild gusts of fire along the ship's flanks--then they were variously spun around or rolled over in the backwash of the take-off. A single monstrous thunderclap seemed to draw an almost visible line from the docks towards the horizon; the docks groaned and shook, and the ship had once more vanished.

A number of seconds later, the spaceport area was shaken again--this time by the crash of a single fixed-mount space gun some eighty miles away. It was the only major weapon to go into action against the fugitive on that side of the planet.

Before its sound reached the docks, two guns on the opposite side of Gull also spewed their stupendous charges of energy into space, but very briefly. Near the pole, the ship had left the planet's

screaming atmosphere in an apparent head-on plunge for Gull's single moon, which was the system's main fortress. This cut off all fire until, halfway to the satellite, the robot veered off at right angles and flashed out of range on the first half-turn of a swiftly widening evasion spiral.

The big guns of the moon forts continued to snarl into space a full minute after the target had faded beyond the ultimate reach of their instruments.

• • •

Things *could* have been much worse, Iliff admitted. And presently found himself wondering just what he had meant by that.

He was neither conscious nor unconscious. Floating in a little Nirvana of first-aid treatment, he was a disembodied mind vaguely aware of being hauled back once more--and more roughly than usual--to the world of reality. And as usual, he was expected to be doing something there--something disagreeable.

Then he realized the robot was dutifully droning a report of recent events into his mind while it continued its efforts to rouse him.

It really wasn't so bad! They weren't actually crippled; they could still outrun almost anything in space they couldn't outfight--as the pursuit had learned by now. No doubt, he might have foreseen the approximate manner in which the robot would conduct their escape under the guns of an alerted planet and a sizable section of that planet's war fleet--while its human master and the eight men from Gull hung insensible to everything in the webs of the force-field that

had closed on them with the closing of the ground lock.

A clean-edged sixteen-foot gap scooped out of the compartment immediately below the lock was, of course, nobody's fault. Through the wildest of accidents, they'd been touched there, briefly and terribly, by the outer fringe of a bolt of energy hurled after them by one of Gull's giant moon-based guns.

The rest of the damage--though consisting of comparatively minor rips and dents--could not be so simply dismissed. It was the result, pure and simple, of slashing headlong through clusters of quick-firing fighting ships, which could just as easily have been avoided.

Dreamily, Iliff debated taking a run to Jeltad and having the insubordinate electronic mentality put through an emotional overhaul there. It wasn't the first time the notion had come to him, but he'd always relented. Now he would see it was attended to. And at once--

With that, he was suddenly awake and aware of the job much more immediately at hand. Only a slight sick fuzziness remained from the measures used to jolt him out of the force-field sleep and counteract the dose of paralysis rays he'd stopped. And that was going, as he bent and stretched, grimacing at the burning tingle of the stuff that danced like frothy acid through his arteries. Meanwhile, the robot's steel tentacles were lifting his erstwhile captors, still peacefully asleep, into a lifeboat which was then launched into space, came round in a hesitant half-circle and started resolutely back towards Gull.

"Here's our next move," Iliff announced as the complaining hum of the lifeboat's "pick-me-up" signals began to fade from their instruments. "They didn't get much of a start on us--and in an ordinary stellar-type yacht, at that. If they're going where I think they are, we might catch up with them almost any moment. But we've got to be sure, so start laying a global interception pattern at full emergency speeds--

centered on Gull, of course. Keep detectors full on and telepath broadcast at ultimate nondirectional range. Call me if you get the faintest indication of a pick-up on either line."

The muted brazen voice stated:

"That's done."

"Fine. The detectors should be our best bet. About the telepath: we're not going to call Pagadan directly, but we'll try for a subconscious response. U-1's got to be in charge by now, unless Correlation's quit being omniscient, but he might not spot that--at least, not right away. Give her this--"

Events had been a little too crowded lately to make the memory immediately accessible. But, after a moment's groping, he brought it from his mind: the picture of a quiet, dawnlit city--seas of sloping, ivory-tinted roofs and slender towers against a flaming sky.

The pickup came on the telepath an hour later.

. . .

"They're less than half a light-year out. Shall I slide in and put a tractor on them?"

"Keep sliding in, but no tractors! Not yet." Iiff chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Sure she didn't respond again?"

"Not after that first subconscious reply. But the yacht may have been blanked against telepathy immediately afterwards."

"Well, anyway, she was still alive then," Iliff said resignedly. "Give Headquarters the yacht's location, and tell them to quit mopping their brows because U-1's on his own now--and any Ceetal that gets within detection range of him will go free-stage the hard way. Then drop a field of freezers over that crate. I want her stopped dead. I guess I'll have to board--"

He grimaced uncomfortably and added, "Get in there fast, fella, but watch the approach! There *couldn't* be any heavy armament on that yacht, but U-1's come up with little miracles before this. Maybe that Ceetal was lucky the guy never got back to Lycanno to talk to him. It's where he was pointed, all right."

"Headquarters is now babbling emotional congratulations," the robot reported, rather coldly. "They also say two Vegan destroyers will be able to reach the yacht within six hours."

"That's nice!" Iliff nodded. "Get just a few more holes punched in you, and we could use those to tow you in."

Enclosed in a steel bubble of suit-armor, he presently propelled himself to the lock. The strange ship, still some five minutes' flight away in fact, appeared to be lying motionless at point-blank range in the port-screens--bow and flanks sparkling with the multiple pinpoint glitter of the freezer field which had wrapped itself around her like a blanket of ravenous, fiery leeches. Any ripple or thrust of power of which she was capable would be instantly absorbed now and dissipated into space; she was effectively immobilized and would remain so for hours.

"But the field's not flaring," Iliff said. He ran his tongue gently over his lips. "That guy does know his stuff! He's managed to insulate his power sources and he's sitting there betting we won't blast the ship but come over and try to pry him out. The trouble is, he's right."

The robot spoke then, for the first time since it had scattered the freezer field in the yacht's path. "Iliff," it stated impersonally and somewhat formally, "regulations do not permit you to attempt the boarding of a hostile spaceship under such suicidal conditions. I am therefore authorized--"

The voice broke off, on a note of almost human surprise. Iliff had not shifted his eyes from the port-screen below him. After a while, he said dryly:

"It was against regulations when I tinkered with your impulses till I found the set that would let you interfere with me for my own good. You've been without that set for years, big boy--except when you were being overhauled."

"It was a foolish thing to do," the robot answered. "I was given no power to act against your decisions, even when they included suicide, if they were justified in the circumstances that formed them. That is *not* the case here. You should either wait for the destroyers to come up or else let me blast U-1 and the yacht together, without any further regard for the fate of the Interstellar operative--though she is undoubtedly of some importance to civilization."

"Galactic Zones thinks so," Iliff nodded. "They'd much rather she stays alive."

"Obviously, that cannot compare with the importance of destroying U-1 the instant the chance is offered. As chief of the Ghant Spacers, his murders were counted, literally, by planetary systems. If you permit his escape now, you give him the opportunity to resume that career."

"I haven't the slightest intention of permitting his escape," Iliff objected mildly.

"My responses are limited," the robot reminded him. "Within those limits I surpass you, of course, but beyond them I need your guidance. If you force an entry for yourself into that ship, you may logically expect to die, and because of the telepathic block around it I shall not be aware of your death. You cannot be certain then that I shall be able to prevent a mind such as that of U-1 from effecting his escape before the destroyers get here."

liff snarled, suddenly white and shaking. He checked himself with difficulty, drew a long, slow breath. "I'm scared of the guy!" he complained, somewhat startled himself by his reaction. "And you're not making me feel any better. Now quit giving good advice, and just listen for a change!"

He went on carefully:

"The Lannai's quite possibly dead. But if she isn't, U-1 isn't likely to kill her now until he finds out what we're after. Even for him, it's a pretty desperate mess--he'll figure we're Vegan, so he won't even try to dicker. But he'll also figure that as long as we think she's alive, we'll be just a little more cautious about how we strike at him.

"So it's worth taking a chance on trying to get her out of there. And here's what you do. In the first place, don't under any circumstances get any closer than medium beaming range to that crate. Then, just before I reach the yacht, you're to put a tractor on its forward spacelock and haul it open. That will let me in close to the control room, and that's where U-1's got to be.

"Once I'm inside, the telepath block will, of course, keep me from communicating. If the block goes down suddenly and I start giving you orders from in there, ignore them! The chances are I'll be talking for U-1. You understand that--I'm giving you an order now to ignore any subsequent orders until you've taken me back aboard again?"

"I understand."

"Good. Whatever happens, you're to circle that yacht for twenty minutes after I enter, and at the exact end of that time you're to blast it. If Pagadan or I, or both of us, get out before the time is up, that's fine. But don't pick us up, or let us come aboard, or pay any attention to any instructions we give you until you've burned the yacht. If U-1 is able to control us, it's not going to do him any good. If he comes out himself--with or without us, in a lifeboat or armor--you blast him instantly, of course. Lab would like to study that brain all right, but this is one time I can't oblige them. You've got all that?"

"I've got it, yes."

"Then can you think of any other trick he might pull to get out of the squeeze?"

The robot was silent a moment. "No," it said then. "I can't. But U-1 probably could."

"Yes, he probably could," Iiff admitted thoughtfully. "But not in twenty minutes--and it will be less than that, because he's going to be a terribly occupied little pirate part of the time, and a pretty shaky one, if nothing else, the rest of it. I may not be able to take him, but I'm sure going to make his head swim!"

. . .

It was going wrong before it started--but it was better not to think of that.

Actually, of course, he had never listed the entering of a hostile ship

held by an experienced and desperate spacer among his favorite games. The powers that hurled a sliver of sub-steel alloys among the stars at dizzying multiples of the speed of light could be only too easily rearranged into a variety of appalling traps for any intruder.

U-1, naturally, knew every trick in the book and how to improve on it. On the other hand, he'd been given no particular reason to expect interception until he caught and blocked their telepath-beam--unless he had managed, in that space of time, to break down the Lannai's mind-shields without killing her, which seemed a next to impossible feat even for him.

The chances were, then, that the spacer had been aware of pursuit for considerably less than an hour, and that wasn't time enough to become really well prepared to receive a boarding party--or so Iliff hoped.

The bad part of it was that it was taking a full four minutes in his armor to bridge the gap between the motionless, glittering yacht and the robot, which had now begun circling it at medium range. That was a quite unavoidable safety measure for the operation as a whole--and actually U-1 should not be able to strike at him by any conceivable means before he was inside the yacht itself. But his brief outburst on the ship was the clearest possible warning that his emotional control had dropped suddenly, and inexplicably, to a point just this side of sanity.

He'd lived with normal fear for years--that was another thing; but only once before had he known a sensation comparable to this awareness of swirling, white-hot pools of unholy terror--held back from his mind now by the thinnest of brittle crusts. That had been long ago, in Lab-controlled training tests.

He knew better, however, than to try to probe into that sort of phenomenon just now. If he did, the probability was that it would spill

full over him at about the moment he was getting his attack under way—which would be, rather definitely, fatal.

But there were other methods of emotional control, simple but generally effective, which might help steady him over the seconds remaining:

There was, for example, the undeniably satisfying reflection that not only had the major disaster of a Ceetal-dominated galaxy been practically averted almost as soon as it was recognized, but that in the same operation—a bonus from Lady Luck!—the long, long hunt for one of civilization's most ruthless enemies was coming to an unexpectedly sudden end. Like the avenging power of Vega personified was the deadly machine behind him, guided by a mind which was both more and less than his own, as it traced its graceful geometrical paths about the doomed yacht. Each completed circle would presently indicate that exactly one more minute had passed of the twenty which were the utmost remaining of U-1's life.

Just as undeniable, of course, was the probability that Pagadan's lease on life would run out even sooner than that—if she still lived.

But there wasn't much he could do about it. If he waited for the Vegan destroyers to arrive, the Lannai would have no chance at all. No normal being could survive another six hours under the kind of deliberately measured mental pressure U-1 would be exerting on her now to drain every possible scrap of information through her disintegrating protective patterns.

By acting as he was, he was giving her the best chance she could get after he had sent her in to spring the trap about U-1 on Gull. In the circumstances, that, too, had been unavoidable. Ironically, the only alternative to killing U-1 outright, as she no doubt had tried to do, was to blunder into one of the situational traps indicated by Correlation, and so restore that grim spacer to his own savage

personality--which could then be counted on to cope with any Ceetal attempt to subordinate him once more to their purposes.

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Waiting the few hours until he could get there to do the job himself might have made the difference between the survival or collapse of civilization not many decades away. If he had hesitated, the Department would have sent the Interstellar operative in, as a matter of course--officially, and at the risk of compromising the whole Lannai alliance as a consequence.

No, there hadn't been any real choice--the black thoughts rushed on--but just the same it was almost a relief to turn from that fact to the other one that his own chances of survival, just now, were practically as bad. Actually, there was no particular novelty in knowing he was outmatched. Only by being careful to remain the aggressor always, consciously and in fact, by selecting time and place and method of attack, was he able regularly to meet the superiority of the monstrous mentalities that were an Agent's most specific game. And back of him had been always the matchless resources of the Confederacy, to be drawn on as and when he needed them.

Now that familiar situational pattern was almost completely reversed. U-1, doomed himself as surely as human efforts could doom him, had still been able to determine the form of the preliminary attack and force his enemy to adopt it.

So, as usual, the encounter would develop by plan, but the plan would not be U-1's. His, for once, was to be the other role, that of the blundering, bewildered quarry, tricked into assault, then rushed

through it to be struck down at the instant most favorable to the hunter.

Almost frantically, he tore his mind back from the trap. But it was just a little late--the swirling terror had touched him, briefly, and he knew his chances of success were down by that further unnecessary fraction.

Then the two-hundred-foot fire-studded bulk of the yacht came flashing toward him, blotting out space; and as he braked his jets for the approach he had time to remind himself that the quarry's rush did, after all, sometimes carry it through to the hunter. And that, in any event, he'd thought it all out and decided he still disliked an unfinished job--and that he *had* liked Pagadan.

Swinging himself up to the yacht's forward spacelock, every weapon at the ready, he caught the robot's brief thought:

"He's waiting for you! All locks have been released from inside."

liff's "Hm-m-m!" was a preoccupied salute to his opponent's logic. The lock had swung gently open before him--there was, of course, no point in attempting to hold it closed against a more powerful ship's sucking tractors; it would, simply, have been destroyed. Gingerly, he floated up to and through the opening, rather like a small balloon of greenish steel-alloy in his bulky armor.

No force-field gripped at his defenses, no devastating bolts of radiant energy crashed at him from the inner walls. That spectral, abnormal terror of a moment ago became a dim sensation which stirred somewhere far down in his mind--and was gone.

He was on the job.

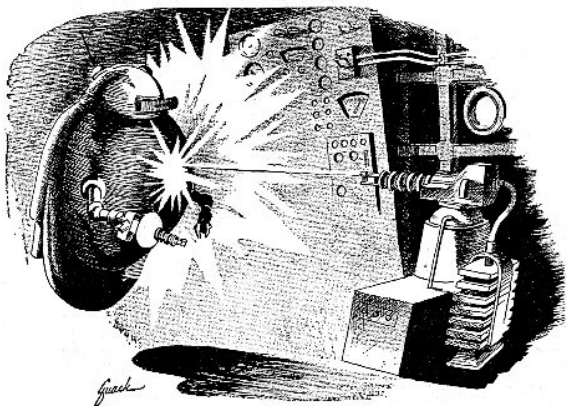
He drove through the inner transmitter, and felt the telepathic barrier

that had blanked out the yacht dissolve and reform again behind him. In that instant, he dropped his shields and sent his mind racing full-open through the ship's interior.

There was the briefest of flickering, distorted thought-images from Pagadan. No message, no awareness of his presence--only the unconscious revelation of mind, still alive but strained to the utmost, already marked by the incoherence of ultimate exhaustion. As he sensed it, it vanished. Something had driven smoothly, powerfully, and impenetrably between--something that covered the Lannai's mind like a smothering fog.

Iliff's shields went up just in time. Then he himself was swaying, physically, under as stunning a mental attack as he had ever sustained.

Like the edge of a heavy knife, the impalpable but destructive force sheared at him--slashed once, twice, and was flicked away before he could grip it, leaving his vision momentarily blurred, his nerve-centers writhing.



A wash of corrosive atomic fire splashed blindingly off the front of his armor as he appeared in the control-room door--through it twin narrow-beam tractor rays came ramming in reversed, brain-jarring thrusts at his face-piece. He drove quickly into the room and let the tractors slam him back against the wall. They could not harm him. They were meant to startle and confuse, to destroy calculation before the critical assault.

The fire was different. For perhaps a minute, his armor could continue to absorb it, but no longer. He was being hurried into the attack from every side. There had been no serious attempt to keep him from getting to the control room--he was meant to come to it.

He saw Pagadan first then, as he was meant to see her. Halfway down the narrow room, she sat facing him, only a few feet from the

raised control platform against the wall, across which the projector fire came flashing in bluish twelve-inch jets. She was in an ordinary space-suit--no armor. She sat rigid and motionless, blocking his advance down that side of the room because the suit she wore would have burst into incandescence at the first splash of the hellish energies pouring dangerously past her.

U-1 made the point obvious--since he was here to get his ally out of the trap, he could not kill her.

He accepted the logic of that by flicking himself farther along the opposite wall, drawing the fire behind him. As he did so, something like a giant beetle shifted position beyond the massive steel desk on the control platform and dipped from sight again, and he knew then that U-1 was in armor almost as massive as his own--armor that had been a part of Pagadan's Interstellar equipment. To the end, that was the only glimpse he had of the spacer.

There remained then only the obvious frontal attack with mind-shields locked--across the platform to bring his own powerful projectors to bear directly on his opponent's armor.

If he *could* do that, he would very likely win almost instantly, and without injuring Pagadan. Therefore, whatever was to happen to him would happen in the instant of time he was crossing the room to reach the spacer.

And his gamble must be that his armor would carry him through it.

Some eight seconds had passed since he entered the room. A stubby tentacle on the front of his chest armor now raised a shielded projectile gun and sprayed the top of the desk beyond which U-1 crouched with a mushrooming, adhesive blanket of incendiaries. The tractor rays, their controls smothered in that liquid flaring, ceased to be a distraction; and Iliff launched himself.

The furious glare of U-1's projectors winked out abruptly.

The force that slammed him down on the surface of the platform was literally bone-shattering.

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For an endless, agonizing instant of time he was in the grip of the giant power that seemed to be wrenching him down into the solid hull of the ship. Then, suddenly released, he was off the edge of the platform and on the floor beside it. Momentarily, at least, it took him out of the spacer's line of fire.

But that was about all. He felt bones in his shattered right arm grinding on each other like jagged pebbles as he tried to reach for the studs that would drive him upward again. Throughout his body, torn muscles and crushed nerve-fibers were straining to the dictates of a brain long used to interpret physical pain as a danger signal only; but to activate any of the instruments of the miniature floating tank that encased him was utterly impossible.

He was doubly imprisoned then--in that two and a half ton coffin, and in ruined flesh that jerked aimlessly in animal agonies or had gone flaccid and unfeeling. But his brain, under its multiple separate protective devices, retained partial control; while the mind that was himself was still taut as a coiled snake, bleakly unaffected by the physical disaster.

He knew well enough what had happened. In one titanic jolt, the control platform's gravity field had received the full flow of the projector's energies. It had burned out almost instantaneously under

that incalculable overload--but not quite fast enough to save him.

And now U-1's mind came driving in, probing for the extent of his enemy's helplessness, then coldly eager for the kill. At contact range, it would be only a matter of seconds to burn through that massive but no longer dangerous armor and blast out the life that lingered within.

Dimly, Iliff felt him rise and start forward. He felt the probing thoughts flick about him again, cautious still, and then the mind-shields relaxing and opening out triumphantly as the spacer approached. He dropped his own shields, and struck.

Never before had he dared risk the sustained concentration of destructive energy he hurled into U-1's mind--for, in its way, it was an overload as unstable as that which had wrecked the gravity field. Instantly, the flaring lights before his face-piece spun into blackness. The hot taste of gushing blood in his mouth, the last sensation of straining lungs and pain-rocked twitching nerves vanished together. Blocked suddenly and completely from every outward awareness, he had become a bodiless force bulleting with deadly resolution upon another.

The attack must have shaken even U-1's battle-hardened soul to its core. Physically, it stopped him in mid-stride, held him rigid and immobilized with nearly the effect of a paralysis gun. But after the first near-fatal moment of shock, while he attempted automatically and unsuccessfully to restore his shields before that rush of destruction, he was fighting back--and not with a similar suicidal fury but with a grim cold weight of vast mental power which yielded further ground only slowly if at all.

With that, the struggle became so nearly a stalemate that it still meant certain victory for the spacer. Both knew the last trace of physical life would drain out of Iliff in minutes, though perhaps only Iliff realized that his mind must destroy itself even more swiftly.

Something tore through his consciousness then like jagged bolts of lightning. He thought it was death. But it came again and again--until a slow, tremendous surprise welled up in him:

It was the *other* mind which was being torn! Dissolving now, crumbling into flashing thought-convulsions like tortured shrieks, though it still struggled on against him--and against something else, something which was by then completely beyond Iliff's comprehension.

The surprise dimmed out, together with his last awareness of himself--still driving relentlessly in upon a hated foe who would not die.

. . .

The voice paused briefly, then added: "Get that part to Lab. They'll be happy to know they hit it pretty close, for once."

It stopped again. After a moment the bright-looking young man in the Jeltad Headquarters office inquired, not too deferentially:

"Is there anything else, sir?"

He'd glanced up curiously once or twice at the vision tank of the extreme-range communicator before him, while he deftly distributed Iliff's after-mission report through the multiple-recorders. However, it wasn't the first time he'd seen a Zone Agent check in from the Emergency Treatment Chamber of his ship, completely enclosed in a block of semisolid protective gel, through which he was being molded, rayed, dosed, drenched, shocked, nourished and psychoed

back to health and sanity.

With the irreverence of youth, the headquarters man considered that these near-legendary heroes of the Department bore on such occasions, when their robots even took care of heartbeat and breathing for them, a striking resemblance to damaged and bad-tempered embryos. He hoped suddenly no one happened to be reading his mind.

"Connect me," liff's voice said, though the lips of the figure in the vision tank did not move, "with Three for a personal report."

"I've been listening," came the deep, pleasantly modulated reply from an invisible source. "Switch off, Lallebeth--you've got all you need. All clear now, liff--and once more, congratulations!" And the picture of the tall, gray-haired, leanfaced man, who was the Third Co-ordinator of the Vegan Confederacy, grew slowly through the telepath transmitter into the mind of the small, wiry shape--half restored and covered with irregular patches of new pink skin--in the ship's Emergency Treatment Chamber.

"Back in the tank again, eh?" the Co-ordinator observed critically. "For the second day after a mission, you don't look too bad." He paused, considering liff closely. "Gravity?" he inquired.

"Gravity!" admitted the embryo.

"That will mess a fellow up!" The Co-ordinator was nodding sympathetically, but it seemed to liff that his superior's mind was on other matters, and more pleasing ones.

"Lab's just going to have to design me a suit," Three ran on with his usual chattiness, "which will be nonreactive to any type of synthetigravs, including tractors. Theoretically impossible, they say, of course! But I'm sure the right approach--"

He interrupted himself:

"I imagine you'll want to know what happened after she got you back to your ship and contacted the destroyers?"

"She left word she was going to get in touch with you on her way back to Jeltad," Iliff said.

"Well, she did that. A remarkably energetic sort of person in a quiet way, Iliff. Fully aware, too, as I discovered, of the political possibilities in the situation. I persuaded her, of course, to take official credit for the death of U-1, and the termination of that part of the Ceetal menace--and, incidentally, for saving the life of one of our Department Agents."

"That wasn't so incidental," Iliff remarked.

"Only in comparison with the other, of course. She really did it then?"

"Oh, she did it all right! I was on my way out fast when she burned him down. Must have been a bad shock to U-1. I understand he hadn't released her mind for more than three or four seconds before she was reaching for his projector."

The Co-ordinator nodded. "The mental resiliency of these highly developed telepathic races must be really extraordinary! Any human being would have remained paralyzed for minutes after such pressures--perhaps for hours. Well, he wasn't omniscient, after all. He thought he could just let her lie there until he was finished with you."

"How long had he been pouring it on her?"

"About four hours! Practically ever since they hit space, coming out from Gull."

"She didn't crack at all?" Iliif asked curiously.

"No, but she thinks she couldn't have lasted more than another hour. However, she seemed to have had no doubt that *you* would arrive and get her out of the mess in time. Rather flattering, eh?"

The agent considered. "No," he said then. "Not necessarily."

His superior chuckled. "At any rate, she was reluctant to take credit for U-1. She thought if she accepted, you might feel she didn't fully appreciate your plunging in to the rescue."

"Well, you seem to have reassured her. And now, just what are the political results going to be?"

"It's too early to say definitely, but even without any help from us they'd be pretty satisfactory. The Ceetal business isn't for public consumption, of course--the boys made a clean sweep of that bunch a few hours back, by the way--but there've always been plenty of idiots building U-1 up into a glamorous figure. The Mysterious Great Bandit of the Spaceways and that sickening kind of stuff. They'll whoop it up just as happily now for the Champion of Vegan Justice who sent the old monster on his way, to wit--the Lannai Pagadan! It won't hurt either that she's really beautiful.

"And through her, of course, the glamor reflects back on her people, our nonhuman allies."

Iliif said thoughtfully: "Think they'll stay fashionable long enough to cinch the alliance?"

The Co-ordinator looked rather smug. "I believe that part of it can be safely left to me! Especially," he added deliberately, "since most of the organized resistance to said alliance has already collapsed."

Iliif waited and made no comment, because when the old boy got as

confidential as all that, he was certainly leading up to something. And he did not usually bother to lead up to things without some good reason—which almost always spelled a lot of trouble for somebody else.

There was nobody else around at all, except Iloff.

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"I had an unexpected visit three days ago," the Co-ordinator continued, "from my colleague, the Sixteenth Co-ordinator, Department of Cultures. He'd been conducting, he said, a personal investigation of Lannai culture and psychology--and had found himself forced to the conclusion there was no reasonable objection to having them join us as full members of the Confederacy. 'A people of extraordinary refinement . . . high moral standards--' Hinted we'd have no further trouble with the Traditionalists either. Remarkable change of heart, eh?"

"Remarkable!" Iloff agreed, watchfully.

"But can you imagine," inquired the Co-ordinator, "what brought Sixteen--between us, mind you, Iloff, as pig-headed and hidebound an obstructionist as the Council has been hampered by in centuries--to this state of uncharacteristic enlightenment?"

"No," Iloff said, "I can't."

"Wait till you hear this then! After we'd congratulated each other and so on, he brought the subject back to various Lannai with whom he'd become acquainted. It developed presently he was interested in the

whereabouts of one particular Lannai he'd met in a social way right here on Jeltad a few weeks before. He understood she was doing work--"

"All right," Iliff interrupted. "It was Pagadan."

The Co-ordinator appeared disappointed. "Yes, it was. She told you she'd met him, did she?"

"She admitted to some circulating in our upper social levels," Iliff said. "What did you tell him?"

"That she was engaged in highly confidential work for the Department at present, but that we expected to hear from her within a few days—I had my fingers crossed there!—and that I'd see to it she heard he'd been inquiring about her. Afterwards, after he'd gone, I sat down and sweated blood until I got her message from the destroyer."

"You don't suspect, I suppose, that she might have psychoed him?"

"Nonsense, Iliff!" the Co-ordinator smiled blandly. "If I had the *slightest* suspicion of that, it would be my duty to investigate immediately. Wouldn't it? But now, there's one point—your robot, of course, made every effort to keep Pagadan from realizing there was no human crew manning the ship. However, she told me frankly she'd caught on to our little Department secret and suggested that the best way to keep it there would be to have her transferred from Interstellar to Galactic. As a manner of fact, she's requested Zone Agent training! Think she'd qualify?"

"Oh, she'll qualify!" Iliff said dryly. "At that, it might be a good idea to get her into the Department, where we can try to keep an eye on her. It would be too bad if we found out, ten years from now, that a few million Lannai were running the Confederacy."

For an instant, the Co-ordinator looked startled. "Hm-m-m," he said reflectively. "Well, that's hardly likely. However, I think I'll take your advice. I might send her over to your Zone in a week or so, and--"

"Oh, no," liff said quietly. "Oh, no, you don't! I've been waiting right along for the catch, and this is one job Headquarters is going to swing without me."

"Now, liff--"

"It's never happened before," liff added, "but right now the Department is very close to its first case of Zone Agent mutiny."

"Now, liff, take it easy!" The Co-ordinator paused. "I must disapprove of your attitude, of course, but frankly I admire your common sense. Well, forget the suggestion--I'll find some other sucker."

He became pleasantly official.

"I suppose you're on your way back to your Zone at present?"

"I am. In fact, we're almost exactly in the position we'd reached when you buzzed me the last time. Now, there wouldn't happen to be some little job I could knock off for you on the way?"

"Well--" the Co-ordinator began, off guard. For the shortest fraction of a second, he had the air of a man consulting an over-stuffed mental file.

Then he started and blinked.

"In your condition? Nonsense, liff! It's out of the question!"

On the last word, Iliff's thought and image flickered out of his mind. But the Third Co-ordinator sat motionless for another moment or so before he turned off the telepath transmitter. There was a look of mild surprise on his face.

Of course, there had been no change of expression possible in that immobilized and anaesthetized embryonic figure—not so much as the twitch of an eyelid! But in that instant, while he was hesitating, there *had* seemed to flash from it a blast of such cold and ferocious malignity that he was almost startled into flipping up his shields.

"Better lay off the little devil for a while!" he decided. "Let him just stick to his routine. I'll swear, for a moment there I saw smoke pour out of his ears."

He reached out and tapped a switch.

"Psych-tester? What do you think?"

"The Agent requires no deconditioning," the Psych-tester's mechanical voice stated promptly. "As I predicted at the time, his decision to board U-1's ship was in itself sufficient to dissolve both the original failure-shock and the artificial conditioning later connected with it. The difficulties he experienced, between the decision and his actual entry of the ship, were merely symptoms of that process and have had no further effect on his mental health."

The Co-ordinator rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Well, that sounds all right. Does he realize I . . . uh . . . had anything to do--?"

"The Agent is strongly of the opinion that you suspected Tahmey of being U-1 when you were first informed of the Interstellar operative's unusual report, and further, that you assigned him to the mission for this reason. While approving of the choice as such, he shows traces of a sub-level reflection that your tendency towards secretiveness will lead you to . . . out-fox . . . yourself so badly some day that he may not be able to help you."

"Why--"

"He has also begun to suspect," the Psych-tester continued, undisturbed, "that he was fear-conditioned over a period of years to the effect that any crisis involving U-1 would automatically create the highest degree of defensive tensions compatible with his type of mentality."

The Co-ordinator whistled softly.

"He's caught on to that, eh?" He reflected. "Well, after all," he pointed out, almost apologetically, "it wasn't such a bad idea in itself! The boy does have this tendency to bull his way through, on some short-cut or other, to a rather dangerous degree. And there was no way of foreseeing the complications introduced by the Ceetal threat and his sense of responsibility towards the Lannai, which made it impossible for him to obey that urgent mental pressure to be careful in whatever he did about U-1."

He paused invitingly, but the Psych-tester made no comment.

"It's hard to guess right every time!" the Co-ordinator concluded defensively.

He shook his head and sighed, but then forgot liff entirely as he turned to the next problem.

