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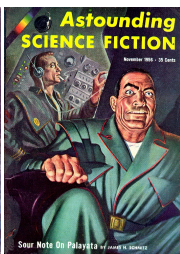
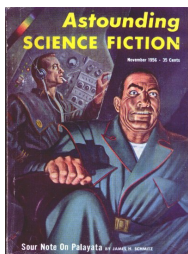
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Sour Note On Palayata BY JAMES H. SCHMITZ

"Sour Note on Palayata"

James Schmitz

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Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

[Editor's note: This story is not directly part of the Trigger Argee and Heslet Quillan cycle of tales. It relates an early adventure of the same Pilch who, many years later, features so prominently in Trigger's history and appears once, in "Compulsion," in the Telzey saga.]

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Bayne Duffold, Assistant Secretary of the Hub Systems' Outposts Department, said that the entire proposed operation was not only illegal but probably unethical. Conceivably, it might lead to anything from the scientific murder of a single harmless Palayatan native to open warfare with an opponent of completely unknown potential.

Pilch, acting as spokesman for the Hub's Psychological Service Ship stationed off Palayata, heard him out patiently. "All that is very true, Excellency," she said then. "That is why you were instructed to call in the Service."

Assistant Secretary Duffold bit his thumb tip and frowned. It was true that the home office had instructed him, rather reluctantly, to call in the Service; but he had made no mention of that part of it to Pilch. And the girl already had jolted him with the information that a Psychological Service operator had been investigating the Palayatan problem on the planet itself during the past four months. "We figured Outposts was due to ask for a little assistance here about this time," was the way she had put it.

"I can't give my consent to your plan," Duffold said with finality, "until I've had the opportunity to investigate every phase of it in person."

The statement sounded foolish as soon as it was out. The remarkably outspoken young woman sitting on the other side of his desk was quite capable of reminding him that the Psychological Service, once it had been put on an assignment, did not need the consent of an Outposts assistant secretary for any specific operation. Or anybody else's consent, for that matter. It was one reason that nobody really liked the Service.

But Pilch said pleasantly, "Oh, we've arranged to see that you have the opportunity, of course! We'll be having a conference on the ship, spaceside"—she glanced at her timepiece—"four hours from now, for that very purpose. We particularly want to know what Outposts' viewpoint on the matter is."

And that was another reason they were disliked: they invariably did try to get the consent of everyone concerned for what they were doing! It made it difficult to accuse them of being arbitrary.

"Well—" said Duffold. There was really no way for him to avoid accepting the invitation. Besides, while he shared the general feeling of distaste for Psychological Service and its ways, he found Pilch herself and the prospect of spending a half-day or so in her company very attractive. The Outposts Station's feminine complement on Palayata, while a healthy lot, hadn't been picked for good looks; and there was something about Pilch, something bright and clean, that

made him regret momentarily that she wasn't connected with a less morbid line of work. "Kidnapping and enforced interrogation of a friendly alien on his own world!" Duffold shook his head. "That's being pretty heavy-handed, you know."

"No doubt," said Pilch. "But you know nobody has been able to persuade a Palayatan to leave the planet, so why waste time trying? We need the ship's equipment for the investigation, and it might be safer if the ship is a long way out from Palayata while it's going on." She stood up. "Will you be ready to hop as soon as I've picked up Wintan?"

"Hop? Wintan?" Duffold, getting to his feet, looked startled. "Oh, I see. Wintan's the operator you've had working on the planet. All right. Where will I meet you?"

"Space transport," said Pilch. "Ramp Nineteen. Half an hour from now." She was at the office entrance by then; and he said hurriedly, "Oh, by the way--"

Pilch looked back. "Yes?"

"You've been here two days," Duffold said. "Have they bothered you at all?"

She didn't ask what he meant. "No," she said. Black-fringed gray eyes looked at him out of a face from which every trace of expression was suddenly gone, as she added quietly, "But of course I've had a great deal of psychological conditioning--"

There hadn't been any need to rub that in, Duffold thought, flushing angrily. She knew, of course, how he felt about the Service--how any normal human being felt about it! Wars had been fought to prevent the psychological control of Hub citizens on any pretext; and then, when the last curious, cultish cliques of psychologists had been dissolved, it had turned out to be a matter of absolute necessity to let them resume their activities. So they were still around, with their snickering questioning of the dignity of Man and his destiny, their eager prying and twisted interpretations of the privacies and dreams of the mind. Of course, they weren't popular! Of course, they were limited now to the operations of Psychological Service! And to admit that one had, oneself--

. . .

Duffold grimaced as he picked up the desk-speaker. He distributed sparse instructions to cover his probable period of absence from the Station, and left the office. There wasn't much time to waste, if he wanted to keep within Pilch's half-hour limit. In the twelve weeks he had been on Palayata, he had avoided direct contact with the natives after his first two or three experiences with the odd emotional effects

they produced in human beings. But since he had been invited to the Service conference, it seemed advisable to confirm that experience once more personally.

The simple way to do that was to walk out to Ramp Nineteen, instead of taking the Station tube.

The moment he stepped outside the building, the remembered surges of acute uneasiness came churning up in him again. The port area was crowded as usual by sightseeing Palayatans. Duffold stopped next to the building for a few moments, watching them.

The uneasiness didn't abate. The proximity of Palayatans didn't affect all humans in the same way; some reported long periods of a kind of euphoria when around them, but that sensation could shift suddenly and unaccountably to sharp anxiety and complete panic. Any one of several dozen drugs gave immunity to those reactions; and the members of the Station's human personnel whose work brought them into contact with the natives were, therefore, given chemical treatment as a regular procedure. But Duffold had refused to resort to drugs.

He started walking determinedly toward the ramp area, making no attempt to avoid the shifting streams of the Palayatan visitors. They drifted about in chattering groups, lending the functional terminal an air of cheerful holiday. If his jangling nerves hadn't told him otherwise, Duffold could have convinced himself easily that he was on a purely human world. Physically, Palayatans were humanoid to the n'th degree, at least as judged by the tolerant standards of convergent evolution. They also loved Hub imports, which helped strengthen the illusion. Male and female tended to wander about their business in a haze of Hub perfumes; and at least one in every five adults in sight wore clothes of human manufacture.

But Duffold's nerves were yammering that these creatures were more alien than so many spiders--their generally amiable attitude and the fact that they looked like human beings could be only a deliberate deception, designed to conceal some undefined but sinister purpose. He broke off that unreassuring line of thought, and clamped his mind down purposefully on a more objective consideration of the odd paradoxes presented by these pseudo-people. Palayatans were even more intrigued, for example, by the Hub humans' spectacular technological achievements than by Hub styles and perfumes. Hence their presence in swarms about the Station where they could watch the space transports arrive and depart. But, in twelve years, they hadn't shown the slightest inclination to transplant any significant part of Hub technology to their own rather rural though semi-mechanized civilization.

At an average i.q. level of seventy-eight in the population, that wasn't surprising, of course. What was not only surprising but completely improbable, when you really considered it, was that they had not only developed a civilization at all, but that it had attained a uniform level

everywhere on the planet.

It simply made no sense, Duffold thought bitterly. Outposts' sociological experts had made the same comment over a year ago, when presented with the available data on Palayata. They had suggested either a detailed check on the accuracy of the data, or a referral of the whole Palayatan question to Psychological Service.

The data had been checked, exhaustively. It was quite accurate. After that, Outposts had had no choice--

. . .

"My, you're perspiring, Excellency!" Pilch said, as he stepped up on the platform of Ramp Nineteen. "This is Wintan. You've met before, I believe. But you really needn't have hurried so." She glanced at her timepiece. "Why, you're hardly even two minutes late."

Wintan was a stocky fair-haired man, and Duffold did recall having met him some months before, when his credentials--indicating a legitimate scholarly interest in sociology--were being checked at the Station.

They shook hands, and Duffold turned to greet the other man.

Only--it wasn't a man.

Mentally, Duffold recoiled in a kind of frenzy. Physically, he reached out and clasped the elderly Palayatan's palm with a firm if clammy grip, shook it twice, and dropped it, his mouth held taut in what he was positive was an appalling grin. Wintan was saying something about, "Albemar! ... guide and traveling companion--" Then Pilch tapped Duffold's shoulder.

"The records you sent by tube have arrived, Excellency. Perhaps you'd better check them."

Gratefully, he followed her into the ship. Inside the lock, she stopped and looked at him quizzically. "Hits you pretty hard, doesn't it?" she murmured. "Great Suns, why don't you take one of those drugs?"

Duffold mopped his brow. "Don't like the idea," he said stubbornly. He indicated the two outside the lock. "Don't tell me you got a volunteer for the investigation?"

Pilch's gleaming black hair swung about her shoulders as she turned to look. "No," she smiled. "Albemar came along to see Wintan off. You've been honored, by the way. He's an itinerant sage of sages among Palayatans--i.q. one hundred and nine! He and Wintan have been working together for months. Of course, Wintan's immune to the emotional reactions--"

"I see," Duffold said coldly. "No doubt he's also had thorough psychological conditioning?"

Pilch grinned at him. "Not many," she said, "have had as much."

2

The Psychology Service ship that swallowed up the transport a few hours later was a camouflaged monstrosity moving along with the edge of an asteroid flow halfway across the system. For all practical purposes, it looked indistinguishable from the larger chunks of planetary debris in its neighborhood, and from its size, it might have had a complement of several thousand people. Duffold was a little surprised that out of that potential number, only five Service members attended the conference, two of whom were Wintan and Pilch. It suggested an economy and precision in organization he had somehow failed to expect here.

The appearance of Buchele, the senior commander in charge of the conference, was almost shocking. He had the odd, waxy skin and cautious motion of a man on whom rejuvenation treatments had taken an incomplete effect, but there was no indication of the mental deterioration that was supposed to accompany that condition. His voice was quick, and he spoke with the easy courtesy of a man to whom command was too natural a thing to be emphasized. He introduced Cabon, the ship's captain, a tall man of Pilch's dark slender breed, who said almost nothing throughout the next few hours, and a red-haired woman named Lual who was, she said, representing Biology Section. Then the conference was under way with a briskness that made Duffold glad he had decided to bring Outposts' full records on Palayata along for the meeting.

They went over the reasons why Outposts was interested in maintaining a Station on Palayata. They were sound reasons: Palayata was a convenient take-off point for the investigation and control of an entire new sector of space, the potential center of a thousand-year, many-sided project. Except for the doubtful factor of the natives, it was as favorable for human use as a world could be expected to become without a century-long conditioning program. The natives themselves represented an immediate new trade outlet for Grand Commerce, whose facilities would make the project enormously less expensive to Government than any similar one on a world that did not attract the organized commercial interests.

Buchele nodded. "Assuming, Excellency, that the Service might be able to establish that the peculiarities of the Palayatan natives are in no way dangerous to human beings, but that the emotional disturbances they cause will have to continue to be controlled by

drugs--would Outposts regard that as a satisfactory solution?"

Duffold was convinced that under the circumstances Outposts would be almost tearfully thankful for such a solution, but he expressed himself a little more conservatively. He added, "Is there any reason to believe that they actually are harmless?"

Buchele's dead-alive face showed almost no expression. "No," he said, "there isn't. Your records show what ours do. The picture of this Palayatan culture isn't fully explainable in the terms of any other culture, human or nonhuman, that we know of. There's an unseen controlling factor--well, call it *X*. That much is almost definitely established. With the information we have, we could make a number of guesses at its nature; and that's all."

Duffold stared bleakly at him. No one in Outposts had cared to put it into so many words, but that was what they had been afraid of.

Buchele said softly, "We have considered two possible methods of procedure. With your assistance, Excellency, we should like to decide between them now."

With his assistance! Duffold became suddenly enormously wary. "Go ahead, commander," he requested affably.

"Very well. Let's assume that *X* actually is a latent source of danger. The section of your records covering the recent deaths of two human beings on the planet might suggest that the danger has become active, but there is no immediate reason to connect those deaths with *X*."

Duffold nodded hesitantly.

"The point that the Service and, I'm sure, Outposts are most concerned with," the gentle voice of the dead-alive man went on, "is that there is absolutely no way of estimating the possible extent of the assumed danger. As we sit here, we may be members of a race which already has doomed itself by reaching out for one new world that should have been left forever untouched. On the basis of our present information, that is exactly as possible as that the Palayatan *X* may turn out to be a completely innocuous factor. Where *X* lies on the scale between those two possibilities can almost certainly be determined, however. The question is simply whether we want to employ the means that will determine it."

"Meaning," said Duffold, "that the rather direct kind of investigation I understand you're planning--kidnapping a native, bringing him out to this ship, and subjecting him to psychological pressures--could start the trouble?"

"It might."

"I agree," Duffold said. "What was the other procedure?"

"To have Outposts and Grand Commerce withdraw all human personnel from Palayata."

"Abandon the planet permanently?" Duffold felt his face go hot.

"Yes," said Buchele.

Duffold drew a slow breath. A spasm of rage shook through him and went away. "We can't do that, and you know it!" he said.

Lusterless eyes hooded themselves in the waxy face. "If you please, Excellency," Buchele said quietly, "there is nothing in the records given us by your Department to indicate that this is an impossibility."

It was true enough. Duffold said sourly, "No need to underline the obvious! We're committed to remain on Palayata until the situation is understood. If there is no danger there, or only ordinary danger--nothing that reaches beyond the planet itself--we can stay or not as we choose. But we can't leave, now that we've brought ourselves to the attention of this X factor, before we know whether or not it constitutes a potential danger to every human world in the galaxy. We can't even destroy the planet, since we don't know whether that would also destroy X, or simply irritate it!"

"Is the destruction of Palayata being seriously considered?" the Service man said.

"Not at the moment," Duffold said grimly.

For the first time then, Buchele shifted his glance slowly about at the other Service members. "It seems that we are in agreement so far," he said, as if addressing them. He looked back at Duffold.

That was when the thought came to Duffold. It startled him, but he didn't stop to consider it. He said, "My Department obviously has been unable to work out a satisfactory solution to the problem. I'm authorized to say that Outposts will give the Service any required support in solving it, providing I'm allowed to observe the operation."

There was a momentary silence. It was bluff, and it wasn't fooling them; but the Service was known to go to considerable lengths to build up good will in the other Departments.

Pilch said suddenly, "We accept the condition--with one qualification."

Duffold hesitated, surprised. Buchele's gaze was on Pilch; the others seemed to be studying him reflectively, but nobody appeared to question Pilch's acceptance. "What's the qualification?" he asked.

"We should have your agreement," she said, "that you will accept any safety measures we feel are required."

"I assume those safety measures are for my benefit," Duffold said gravely.

"Well, yes--"

"Why," said Duffold, "in that case I thank you for your concern. And, of course, you have my agreement."

The others stirred and smiled. Pilch looked rueful. "It's just that--"

"I know," Duffold nodded. "It's just that I haven't had any psychological conditioning."

. . .

Pilch was called from the conference room immediately afterwards. This time Duffold was not surprised to discover that she appeared to be in charge of the actual kidnapping project and that she was arranging to include him in the landing party. There seemed to be a constant easy shifting of authority among these people which did not correspond too well with the rank they held.

Others came in. He began to get a picture of unsuspected complexities of organization and purpose within this huge, ungainly ship. There was talk of pattern analysis and factor summaries at the table at which Buchele remained in charge, and Duffold stayed there, since they were dealing with material with which he was in part familiar. It appeared that Wintan, the Service operator who had been working planetside on Palayata, had provided the ship's Integrators with detailed information not included in previous reports; and the patterns were still being revised. So far, Buchele seemed to feel that the revisions indicated no significant changes.

Somebody came to warn Duffold that the landing operation was to get underway in eighty minutes. He hurried off to contact the Outposts Station on Palayata and extend the period he expected to be absent.

When he came back, they were still at it--

. . .

There seemed to be no permanent government or permanent social structure of any sort on Palayata; not even, as a rule, anything resembling permanent family groups. On the other hand, some family groups maintained themselves for decades--almost as if someone were trying to prove that no rule could be applied too definitely to the perverse planet! Children needing attention attached themselves to any convenient adult or group of adults and were accepted until they

decided to wander off again.

There were no indications of organized science or of scientific speculation. Palayatan curiosity might be intense, but it was brief and readily satisfied. Technical writings on some practical application or other of the scientific principles with which they were familiar here could be picked up almost anywhere and were used in the haphazard instruction that took the place of formal schooling. There wasn't even the vaguest sort of recorded history, but there were a considerable number of historical manuscripts, some of them centuries old and lovingly preserved, which dealt with personal events of intense interest to the recorder and of very limited usefulness to his researcher. It had been the Hub's own archaeological workers who eventually turned up evidence indicating that Palayata's present civilization had been drifting along in much the same fashion for at least two thousand years and perhaps a good deal longer.

Impossible ... impossible ... impossible--if things were what they seemed to be!

So they weren't what they seemed to be. Duffold became aware of the fact that by now Buchele and Wintan and he were the only ones remaining at that table. The others presumably had turned their attention to more promising work; and refreshments had appeared.

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They ate thoughtfully until Duffold remarked, "They're still either very much smarter than they act--smarter than we are, in fact--or something is controlling them. Right?"

Buchele said that seemed to be about it.

"And if they're controlled," Duffold went on, "the controlling agency is something very much smarter than human beings."

Wintan shook his short-cropped blond head. "That wouldn't necessarily be true."

Duffold looked at him. "Put it this way," he said. "Does the Service think human beings, using all the tricks of your psychological technology, could control a world to the extent Palayata seems to be controlled?"

"Oh, certainly!" Wintan said cheerfully; and Buchele nodded. "Given one trained operator to approximately every thousand natives, something quite similar could be established," the senior commander said dryly. "But who would want to go to all that trouble?"

"And keep it up for twenty centuries or so!" Wintan added. "It's a

technical possibility, but it seems a rather pointless one."

Duffold was silent for a moment, savoring some old suspicions. Even if the Service men had a genuine lack of interest in the possibilities of such a project, the notion that Psychology Service felt it was capable of that degree of control was unpleasant. "What methods would be employed?" he said. "Telepathic amplifiers?"

"Well, that would be one of the basic means, of course," Wintan agreed. "Then, sociological conditioning--business of picking off the ones that were getting too bright to be handled. Oh, it would be a job, all right!"

Telepathic amplifiers--Outposts was aware, as was everyone else, that the Service employed gadgetry in that class; but no one outside the Service took a very serious view of such activities. History backed up that opinion with emphasis: the psi boys had produced disturbing effects in various populations from time to time, but in the showdown the big guns always had cleaned them up very handily. Duffold said hopefully, "Does it seem to be telepathy we're dealing with here?"

Wintan shook his head. "No. If it were, we could spot it and probably handle whoever was using it. You missed that part of the summary, Excellency. Checking for tele-impulses was a major part of the job I was sent to do." He looked at Buchele, perhaps a trifle doubtfully. "Palayatans appear to be completely blind to any telepathic form of approach; at least, that's the report of my instruments."

"Or shut-off," Buchele said gently.

"Or shut-off," Wintan agreed. "We can't determine that with certainty until we get our specimen on board. We know the instruments would have detected such a resistance in any human being."

Buchele almost grinned. "In any human being we've investigated," he amended.

Wintan looked annoyed. From behind Duffold, Pilch's voice announced, "I'll be wanting his Excellency at Eighty-two Lock in"--there was something like a millisecond's pause, while he could imagine her glancing at her timepiece again--"seventeen minutes. But Lual wants him first."

As Duffold stood up, she added, "You two had better come along. Biology has something to add to your discussion on telepathy."

"Significant?" Buchele asked, coming stiffly to his feet.

"Possibly. The Integrators should finish chewing it around in a few more minutes."

Duffold had been puzzling about what Lual and the Biology Section

could be wanting of him, but the moment he stepped out of a transfer lock and saw the amplification stage set up, with a view of a steamy Palayatan swamp floating in it, he knew what it was and he had a momentary touch of revulsion. The incident with the keff creature, which had cost the lives of two Outposts investigators, had been an unlovely one to study in its restructure; and he had studied it carefully several times in the past few days, in an attempt to discover any correlation with the general Palayatan situation. He had been unsuccessful in that and, taking the seat next to the stage that was indicated to him, he wondered what Biology thought it had found.

Lual, the red-headed woman who had attended the earlier part of the general conference, introduced him to a fat, elderly man, whose name Duffold did not catch, but who was Biology's Section Head. He was operating the amplifier and remained in his seat. Lual said into the darkened room:

"This is the record of an objective restructure his Excellency brought shipward with him. The location of the original occurrence was at the eastward tip of Continent Two; the date, one hundred thirty-eight standard, roughly one hundred hours ago. To save time, we would like his Excellency to give us a brief explanation of the circumstances."

Duffold cleared his throat. "The circumstances," he said carefully, "are that we have investigators working in that area. Ostensibly, they are archaeologists. Actually, they're part of an Outposts project, checking the theory that Palayata is operating under some kind of secret government. There is a concentration of the deserted settlements we find all over the planet around those swamps. The two men involved in the restructure were working through such a settlement—or supposed to be working through it—when the accident occurred."

He added, "If it was an accident. I brought the record along because of the possibility that it was something else."

The Section Head said in a heavy voice, "The restructure appears to have been made within two hours after the actual incident."

"A little less than two hours," Duffold agreed. "There were hourly position checks. When the team failed to check in, a restructure heli began to track them. By the time they reached this keff animal, some natives already had killed it—with a kind of harpoon gun, as the restructure shows. Some portions of the bodies of our investigators were recovered."

"Had the natives observed the incident?" Lual inquired.

"They said they had—too far off to prevent it. They claim they kill a keff whenever they find one, not because they regard them as a danger to themselves but because they are highly destructive to food animals in the area. They hadn't realized a keff might also be

destructive to human beings."

The Section Head said, "This is a view of the keff some minutes after the killing of the two men. The promptness with which the restructure was made permits almost limitless detail."

Duffold felt himself wince as the colors in the amplification stage between them blurred and ran briefly and cleared again. The keff appeared, half-submerged in muddy water, a mottled green and black hulk, the eyeless head making occasional thrusting motions, with an unpleasant suggestion of swallowing.

"Weight approximately three tons," said the Section Head. "The head takes up almost a third of its length. Motions very slow. Normally, this would indicate a vegetarian or omnivorous animal with a limitless food supply, such as these mile-long swamp stretches would provide. Possibly aggressive when attacked, but not dangerous to any reasonably alert and mobile creature."

He added, "However, we were able to pick up tele-impulses at this point, which indicate that the natives' description of its food habits is correct. I suggest using tel-dampers. The impulses are rather vivid."

Pilch's voice said, "Hold still!" behind Duffold, and something like a pliable ring slipped down around his skull. Soft clamps fastened it here and there, and then he was aware of her settling down in the chair beside him. Her whisper reached him again, "If you don't like what you're getting, say so! They don't really need you for this."

Duffold made a grunting sound, indicating complete contentment with his situation and a desire not to be disturbed, but not entirely turning down the suggestion. There were crawling feelings along his spine.

He felt good. He felt drowsy but purposeful, because now there were only a few more steps to go, and then the great pink maw would open before him, and he could relax right into it. Relax and--

He jerked upright in his chair, horror prickling through his nerves. Pilch was tapping his arm.

"Outside!" she whispered. "Keep the damper on." They moved through the dim room; a door clicked ahead of Duffold, then clicked again behind him, and light flooded around them.

He pulled the tel-damper off his head like some small, unclean, clinging animal. "*Whew!*" he breathed. "Should have taken your advice, I think!"

"Well, you didn't know. *We* should have thought of it. There are ways of letting stuff like that come at you, and you--"

"Don't say it," he warned. "I'm learning my limitations." He was silent

a moment. "Was that how it felt to them?" He described his sensations.

"They felt something like that," she said. "You gave the impulses your individual interpretations, of course, because you'd seen the restructure and knew what the keff was like. Cabon will be out in a moment, by the way. They got the Integrators' report back on this. I gather there's nothing definite enough in it to change our plans."

"I see," Duffold said absently. Mentally, he was reliving that section of the restructure in which the two investigators had come walking and wading right up to the keff, looking about as if searching for something, and apparently not even aware of each other's presence. Then they had stood still, while the huge head came slowly up out of the water before them--and the wet, pink maw opened wide and slapped shut twice.

Cabon stepped out of the room behind them. He grinned faintly. "Raw stuff," he remarked. "You've got a fine restructure team, Excellency."

"Any delays indicated?" Pilch inquired.

"No. You'd better go ahead on schedule. It's almost certain we'll still need our average Palayatan--and the one we've got spotted isn't going to hold still for us forever."

3

Yunnan, the average Palayatan, had finished the satisfactory third day of his solitary camping hike with a satisfactory meal composed largely of a broiled platterful of hard-shelled and hard-to-catch little water creatures, famed for their delicacy. The notion of refreshing his memory of that delicacy had been in his mind for some weeks and had finally led him up to this high mountain plateau and its hundreds of quick, cold streams where they were to be found at their best.

Having sucked out the last of the shells and pitched it into his camp fire, he sat on for a while under the darkening sky, watching the stars come out and occasionally glancing across the plateau at the dark, somber mass of the next mountain ridge. Two other campfires had become very distantly visible there, indicating the presence of other soqua spearmen. He would stay here two more days, Yunnan thought, and then turn back, towards the valleys and the plain, and return to his semi-permanent house in his semi-permanent settlement, to devote himself again for a while to his semi-permanent occupation of helping local unbannut-growers select the best seeds for next season's crop.

It was all a very pleasant prospect. Life, Yunnan told himself, with a sense of having summed it up, was a pretty good thing! It was a conclusion he had come to before under similar circumstances.

Presently he rebuilt the fire, stretched out on some blankets close to it, and pulled a few more blankets on top of him. He blinked up at the stars a few more times and fell sound asleep.

Far overhead, a meteor that was not a meteor hit the atmosphere, glowed yellow, and vanished. A survey heli of the Hub Station's Planetary Geographers outfit, which had been moving high and unobtrusively above the plateau all day, came in closer to a point almost directly above Yunnan's camp, remained there a few minutes, and moved off again across the plateau and on beyond the mountain ridges to the east.

A dark spherical body, the size of a small house, sank swiftly and silently toward the plateau and came to a halt finally a hundred yards above Yunnan's camp and a little more than that to one side of it. Presently a breeze moved from that direction across the camp, carrying traces of a chemical not normally found in such concentration in Palayata's air. Yunnan inhaled it obligingly. A few minutes later, the breeze grew suddenly into a smooth, sustained rush of air, like the first moan of an approaching storm. Sparks flew from the fire, and leaves danced out of the trees. Then the wind subsided completely, and three people came walking into the camp. They bent above Yunnan.

"Perfect reaction!" Pilch's voice said. She straightened and glanced up. The spherical object had come gliding along at treetop level behind them and was now stationed directly overhead. Various and sundry clicking, buzzing, and purring sounds came out of its open lock. "Take them two or three more minutes to get a complete reproduction," she remarked. "Nothing to do but wait."

Duffold grunted. He was feeling uncomfortable again, and not entirely because of the presence of a Palayatan. Pilch had explained what had happened to Yunnan; the patterns of external sensory impressions that had been sifting into his brain at the moment the trace-chemical reached it through his blood stream were fixed there now, and no new impressions were coming through. He would remain like that, his last moment of sleep-sensed external reality extending itself unchangingly through the hours and days until the blocking agent was removed. What worried Duffold was that the action was a deliberate preliminary prod at the mysterious *X* factor, and if *X* felt prodded, there was no telling at all just how it might respond.

He looked down at their captive. Yunnan certainly looked quietly asleep, but the mild smile on his humanoid features might have expressed either childlike innocence or a rather sinister enjoyment of the situation, depending on how you felt about Palayatans.



And assuming Yunnan was harmless, at least for the moment, was somebody—or something—else, far off or perhaps quite close in the thickening night around them, aware by now that untoward and puzzling things were going on in a Palayatan mind?

Duffold knew they were trying to check on that, too. A voice began murmuring presently from one of the talkie gadgets Pilch wore as earrings. When it stopped, she said briefly, "All right." And then, to Duffold, "Not a pulse coming through the tele-screens that wouldn't be normal here! Just animals—" She sounded disappointed about it.

"Too bad!" Duffold said blandly. His nerves unknotted a trifle.

"Well, it's negative evidence anyway!" Pilch consoled him. The voice murmured from the same earring again, and she said, "All right. Put down the carrier then!" and to her two companions, "They're all done in the shuttle. Let's go."

A grav-carrier came floating down through the dark air toward them, and the crewman who had accompanied them into the camp began to extinguish the fire. He was conscientious and thorough about it. Pilch stepped up on the carrier. Duffold looked at her, at the busy crewman, and at Yunnan. Then he set his teeth, wrapped the Palayatan up in his blankets, picked him up, and laid him down on the carrier.

"Hm-m-m!" said Pilch. "Not bad, Excellency!"

Duffold thought a bad word and hoped she wasn't being telepathic.

"Of course not!" said Pilch, reaching up for the earring that hadn't come into noticeable use so far. She began to unscrew it. "Besides, I'm shutting off the pick-up right now, Excellency--"

Almost two hours later, Yunnan awakened briefly. He blinked up at the familiar star-patterns overhead, gazed out across the plateau, and noted that one of the campfires there had gone out. Thus reminded, he yawned and scratched himself, stood up, and replenished his own fire. Then he lay down again, listened for a half-minute or so to the trilling night-cries of two small tree creatures not far away, and drifted back to sleep.

. . .

"He's completely out of the sensory stasis now, of course," Wintan explained to Duffold as the view of Yunnan's camp faded out before them. "How did you like the staging job?"

Duffold admitted it was realistic. He was wondering, however, he added, what would have happened if the Palayatan had decided to go for a stroll and walked off the stage?

"Well," Wintan said reflectively, "if he'd done that, we would have known he was ignoring the five or six plausible reasons against doing it that were planted in his awareness. In that case, we could have counted on his being an individual embodiment of the X factor, so to speak. The staff was prepared for the possibility."

Duffold knew that Psychological Service as such was, as a matter of fact, prepared for the possibility that they had hauled a super-being on board which conceivably could destroy or take control of this huge ship--and distant weapons were trained on the ship to insure that it wouldn't be under alien control for more than an instant. Even more distantly, out in the nothingness of space somewhere, events on the ship were being subjected to a moment-to-moment scrutiny and analysis.

Nor was *that* all. The Outposts patrol ships at Palayata had been

relieved from duty by a Supreme Council order from the Hub; and, in their places, heavily armed cruisers of a type none of the patrol commanders could identify had begun to circle the planet.

"They won't break up Palayata unless they have to, of course!" Cabon had said, in reporting that matter to Duffold. "But that's no worry of ours at the moment. Our job is to trace out, record, and identify every type of thought, emotion, and motivation that possibly could go ticking through this Yunnan's inhuman little head. If we find out he's exactly what he seems to be, that eliminates one possible form of X."

And if Yunnan was something other than the not too intelligent humanoid he seemed to be, they had X neatly isolated for study. Whether or not they completed the study then depended largely on the nature of the subject.

Rationally, Duffold couldn't disagree with the method. It was drastic; the casually icy calculation behind the preparations made by the Service had, in fact, shocked him as nothing else had done in his life. But, at one stage or another, it would bring X into view. If X was both hostile and more than a match for man, man at least had avoided being taken by surprise. If X was merely more than a match for man--

"Mightn't hurt us at all to learn how to get along with our superiors for a while," Wintan had observed thoughtfully.

It was a notion Duffold found particularly difficult to swallow.

He had noticed, in this last hour while they completed their preparations to invade the Average Palayatan's mind, occasional traces of a tingling excitement in himself--something close to elation. By and by, it dawned on him that it was the kind of elation that comes from an awareness of discovery.

He was engaged in an operation with the most powerful single organization of the Hub Systems. The despised specialists of Psychology Service, the errand boys of the major Departments, were, as a matter of fact, telling everyone, apparently including the Hub's Supreme Council, just what should be done about Palayata and how to do it.

Probably, it hadn't always been that way, Duffold decided; but the regular Departments of the Hub were getting old. For a decade, Outposts--one of the most brisk of the lot--had been gathering evidence that Palayatan civilization wasn't so much quaint as incomprehensible. For an equal length of time, it had been postponing recognition of the fact that the incomprehensibility might have a deadly quality to it--that, quite possibly, something very strange and very intelligent was in concealment on Palayata, observing human beings and perhaps only tolerating their presence here for its unknown purposes.

Even after the recognition had been forced on it, the Department had been unwilling to make any move at all on its own responsibility, for fear it might make the wrong one. Instead, it called in Psychology Service--

For the same reason that Psychology Service always was called in when there was an exceptionally dirty and ticklish job to be done--the Service People showed an unqualified willingness to see any situation exactly as it was and began dealing with it immediately in the best possible manner, to the limits of human ability. It was an attitude that guaranteed in effect that any problem which was humanly resolvable was going to get resolved.

The excitement surged up in Duffold again. And that, he added to himself, was why they didn't share the normal distaste for the notion of encountering a superior life form. The most superior of life forms couldn't improve on that particular attitude! Here or elsewhere, the Service eventually might be defeated, but it could never be outclassed.

He wondered at that difference in organizations that were equally human and decided it was simply that the Service now attracted the best in human material that happened to be around. At other times in history, the same type of people might have been engaged in very different activities--but they would always be found moving into the front ranks of humanity and moving out of the organizations that were settling down to the second-rate job of maintaining what others had gained.

As for himself--well, he'd gone fast and far in Outposts. He knew he was brainier than most. If it took some esoteric kind of mental training to get himself into mankind's real front ranks, he was going to take a look at it--

Providing, that was, that the lives of everyone on the ship didn't get snuffed out unexpectedly sometime in the next few hours!

. . .

Wintan: Pilch, your lad has just bucked his way through simultaneously to the Basis of Self-Esteem and the Temptations of Power and Glory! I'm a little in awe of him. What to do?

Pilch: Too early for a wide-open, I think! It could kill him. If we tap anything, we're going to have trouble. Buchele isn't--

Cabon: Make it wide-open, Wintan. My responsibility.

Pilch: *No!*

Voice from Somewhere Far Out: Agreement with Cabon's decision. Proceed!

. . .

Wintan had left the pick-up room for the time being; and Duffold had it all to himself.

It was an odd place. Almost the most definite thing you could say about it was that it was somewhere within the vast bulk of the Service ship. Duffold sat in something like a very large and comfortable armchair with his feet up on a cushioned extension; and so far as he could tell, the armchair might have been floating slowly and endlessly through the pale-green, luminous fog which started about eight feet from his face in every direction. The only other thing visible in the room was another chair off to his right, in which Wintan had been sitting. Even the entrance by which they had come in was undetectable in the luminosity; when Wintan left, he appeared to vanish in cool green fire long before he reached it.

There wasn't much more time before the work on the captured Palayatan began, and Duffold started running the information he'd been given regarding the operation and his own role as an observer through his mind. Some of the concepts involved were unfamiliar; but, on the whole, it sounded more comprehensible than he had expected. They were acting on the assumption that, with the exception of the X factor, the structure of a Palayatan's mental personality was similar to the human one. They reacted to outside stimuli in much the same way and appeared to follow the same general set of basic motivations.

It was already known that there were specific differences. The Palayatan mind was impermeable to telepathic impulses at the level of sensory and verbal interpretations, which was the one normally preferred by human telepaths when it could be employed, since it involved the least degree of individual garbling of messages. Palayatans, judging by the keff creature's inability to affect them, were also impermeable to telepathed emotional stimuli. In spite of the effect they themselves produced on most untrained humans, it had been demonstrated that they also did not radiate at either of these levels, as against the diffused trickling of mental and emotional impulses normally going out from a human being.

At least, that was the picture at present. It might change when the ship's giant amplifiers, stimulators, and microscanners were brought into play upon Yunnan's sleeping brain. If X was a concealed factor of the Palayatan's personality, it would show up instantly. In that case, the investigation as such would be dropped, and the Service would switch its efforts into getting X into communication. It should at least be possible to determine rather quickly whether or not X was hostile

and how capable it was of expressing hostility effectively, either here or on the planet.

But if it was found that Yunnan, as he knew himself, was Yunnan and nothing else, the search would drop below the levels of personality toward the routine mechanisms of the mind and the organic control areas. Somewhere in those multiple complexities of interacting structures of life must be a thing that was different enough from the standard humanoid pattern to make Palayata what it was. They had talked of the possibility that the *X* influence, if it was an alien one, did not extend actively beyond the planet. But the traces of its action would still be there and could be interpreted.

Duffold's impressions of the possibilities at that stage became a little vague, and he shifted his attention to a consideration of what Wintan had said regarding himself. There was apparently always some risk involved in an investigation of this kind, not to the subject, but to the investigator.

Or, in this case, to the observer.

The trouble was, according to Wintan, that the human mind—or any other type of mind the Service had studied so far, for that matter—was consciously capable of only a very limited form of experience. "A practical limitation," Wintan had said. "Most of what's going on in the universe isn't really any individual's concern. If he were trying to be aware of it all the time, he couldn't walk across the room without falling on his face. Besides, it would kill him."

And when Duffold looked questioningly at him, he added, "Did you ever go in for the Sensational Limitations vogue, Excellency?"

"No," Duffold said shortly.

"Well," Wintan acknowledged, "they get a little raw, at that! However, they do show that a human being can tolerate only a definitely limited impact of emotion—artificially induced or otherwise—at any one time, before he loses awareness of what's going on. Now, the more or less legitimate material the Sensationalists use is drawn from emotions that other human beings have at one time or another consciously experienced, sometimes under extreme stimulation, of course. However, as a rather large number of Sensationalists have learned by now, the fact that a sensation came originally from a human mind doesn't necessarily make its re-experience a safe game for another human being."

He was silent for a moment. "That keff animal," he said then. "You saw it. Can you imagine yourself thinking and feeling like a keff, Excellency?"

Duffold grinned. "I hadn't thought of it," he said. He considered and shook his head. "Probably not too well."

"It appears to be a fairly complicated creature," Wintan said. "Stupid, of course. It doesn't need human intelligence to get along. But it's not just a lump of life responding to raw surges of emotion. There are creatures that aren't much else, a good deal farther down on the scale. They haven't developed anything resembling a calculating brain, and what we call emotion is what guides them and keeps them alive. To be effective guides to something like that, those emotions have to be pretty strong. As a matter of fact, they're quite strong enough to wreck anything as complex and carefully balanced as a conscious human mind very thoroughly, if it contacts them for more than a very short time."

"How do you know?" Duffold inquired.

"So far, our Hub Sensationalists haven't learned how to bottle anything like that," Wintan said. "At least, we haven't run into any indications of it. However, Psychology Service did learn how, since it was required for a number of reasons. In the process, we might have discovered that emotion can kill the body by destroying the mind in a matter of seconds if we hadn't been made aware of the fact a good deal earlier--"

"Yes?" Duffold said politely.

"Excellency," Wintan said, "civilized man is--with good reason, I think--a hellishly proud creature. Unfortunately, his achievements often make it difficult for him to accept that his remote ancestors--and the remote ancestors of every other mobile and intelligent life form we've come across--were, at one period, specks of appetite in the mud, driven by terrors and a brainless lust for survival, ingestion, and procreation that are flatly inconceivable to the conscious human mind today."

Duffold laughed. "I'll accept it," he said agreeably.

"In that case," said Wintan, "you might consider accepting that precisely the same pattern is still present in each of our intelligent life forms and is still basically what motivates them as organisms. Self-generated or not, emotions like that can still shock the mind that contacts them consciously in full strength to death. Normally, of course, that's a flat impossibility--our mental structure guarantees that what filters through into consciousness is no more than the trace of a shadow of the basic emotions ... no more than consciousness needs to guide it into reasonably intelligent conduct and, usually, at any rate, no more than consciousness can comfortably tolerate. But in an investigation of this kind, we'll be playing around the edges of the raw stuff sooner or later. We'll try to keep out of it, of course."

Duffold said thoughtfully that he was beginning to see the reason for safeguards. "What makes it possible for you to get into trouble here?"

"Something like a cubic mile of helpful gadgetry," Wintan said. "It's

quite an accomplishment."

"It is," Duffold said. "So it's not all conditioning then. Can you--conditioned--people get along without safeguards?"

Wintan said amiably that to some extent they could. On reflection, it didn't sound too bad to Duffold. The particular type of safeguard that had been provided for him in the pick-up room was to the effect that as he approached an emotional overload, he would be cut out of contact automatically with the events in the ship. Otherwise, he would remain an observer-participant, limited only by his lack of understanding of the progress of the operation.

. . .

Wintan: I've given him fair warning, Pilch.

Pilch, grudgingly: There's no such thing in this game! I suppose you did what you could.

. . .

Pictures moved now and then through the luminous mist. Some were so distinct that it seemed to Duffold he was looking straight through the bulk of the ship at the scene in question. Most were mere flickers of form and color, and a few a tentative haziness in which a single detail might assume a moment of solidity before the whole faded out.

"Cabon's checking the final arrangements," Wintan said from the chair to Duffold's right.

Duffold nodded, fascinated by the notion that he was observing the projected images of a man's mind, and disappointed that the meaning of much of it apparently was wasted on him. Buchele's waxy face showed up briefly, followed by the picture of a thick-necked man whose cheekbones and jaw were framed by a trimmed bristle of red beard.

"Our primary investigators, those two," Wintan said briefly. "The other one's Ringor--head of Pattern Analysis." The mind-machines and their coordinators did what they could; they supplied power and analyzed a simultaneous wealth of detail no human mentality could begin to grasp in the same span of time. To some degree, they also predicted the course that should be followed. But the specific, moment to moment turns of the search for X were under the direction of human investigators. Eight or nine others would trace the progress of the leading two but would not become immediately involved unless they were needed. Pilch was one of these.

The reconstruction of Yunnan's camp area came gradually into sight now, absorbing the pick-up medium as it cleared and spread about and behind the two observers. Presently, it seemed to Duffold that he was looking down at the sleeping figure near the fire from a point about forty feet up in Palayata's crisp night air. The illusion would have been perfect except for two patches of something like animated smoke to either side of Yunnan. He studied the phenomenon for a moment and was startled by a sudden impression that the swirling vapory lines of one of those patches was the face of the red-bearded investigator. It changed again before he could be sure. He glanced over at Wintan, suspended incongruously in his chair against the star-powdered night.

The Service man grinned. "Saw it, too," he said in a voice that seemed much too loud here to Duffold. "The other one is Buchele—or the projector's impression of Buchele at the moment. They're designed to present what they get in a form that makes some meaning in human perceptions, but they have peculiar notions about those! You'll get used to it."

He was, Duffold decided, speaking of one of the machines. He was about to inquire further when the scene became active.

Something a little like a faint, brief gleaming of planetary auroras ... then showers of shooting stars ... played about the horizons. For a moment he forgot he was watching a reconstruction. The lights and colors flowed together and became the upper part of the body of a blond woman smiling down over the distant mountains at the sleeping Palayatan, her hands resting on the tops of the ridges. Briefly, the face blurred into an unpleasantly grimacing mask and cleared again. Then the woman was gone, and in her place was a brightly lit, perfectly ordinary looking room, in which a man in the uniform of the Service sat at a table.

"What's all this?" Duffold breathed.

"Eh?" Wintan said absently. "Oh!" He turned his head and laughed. "Our investigators were tuning in on each other. They've worked together before, but it takes a moment or so— Ah, here we go!"

Duffold blinked. The universe all around them was suddenly an unquiet grayness, a vaguely disturbing grayness because there was motion in it which couldn't be identified. A rapid shifting and flowing of nothing into nothing that just missed having significance for him.

"About as good a presentation as the projector can manage," Wintan's voice said, almost apologetically—and Wintan, too, Duffold noticed now, was invisible in the grayness. He felt uncomfortably isolated. "You're looking at ... well, it would be our Palayatan's consciousness, if he were awake."

Duffold said nothing. He had been seized by the panicky notion that breathing might become difficult in this stuff, and he was trying to

to dismiss that notion. A splash of blue, a beautiful, vivid blue, blazed suddenly in the grayness and vanished. "They're moving," Wintan's voice murmured. "Dream level now!"

Breathing ~~was~~ difficult! If only that blue would come back--

It came. Duffold gasped with relief, as gray veils exploded about him and a bright blue sky, deep with cloudbanks, spread overhead and all about. Wintan spoke from somewhere, with a touch of concern, "If this is bothering you at all, I can shut you out of it instantly, you know!"

"No," Duffold said. He broke out laughing. "I just discovered I'm not here!"

It was true in a peculiar way. There wasn't a trace of Wintan or himself or of their supporting chairs in sight here. He looked down through empty space where his body should have been and laughed again. But he could still feel himself and the pressure of the chair against him, at any rate; so he hadn't become disembodied.

"Dreams are odd." Wintan's voice sounded as if he might be smiling, too, but the concern hadn't quite left it. "Especially when they're somebody else's. And especially again when that someone isn't human. Incidentally, this is a visual pick-up for you. All you have to do to break it is to close your eyes."

Duffold closed his eyes experimentally and patted the side of the chair. Then he opened them again--

Yunnan's dream had changed in that instant. He was looking down now into a section of a shallow stream, swift-moving and clear, through which a creature like a mottled egg darted behind a silver lure. Another one showed up beyond it, both flashingly quick, propelled by a blurred paddling of red legs.

"Mountain soquas," said Wintan. "Our friend was spearing them during the day." His voice sounded thoughtful. "No trace of anything that might indicate X, so far. I imagine they'll stimulate a different type of sequence--"

The scene flowed, as he spoke, into something entirely different again. This was, Duffold decided, apparently an angular caricature of a Palayatan town-street, presented in unpleasantly garish colors. Something that was in part a red-legged soqua and in part an extremely stout Palayatan was speaking excitedly to a small group of other Palayatans. The next moment, they had all turned and were staring straight at Duffold. Their eyes seemed to contain some terrible accusation. Involuntarily, he cringed--just as the scene flickered out of existence.

The green luminescence was about them again. From the other chair, Wintan grinned briefly at him.

"Tapped a nightmare layer," he explained. "It woke him up. So our little friends have had dreams, too, occasionally!" He studied Duffold quizzically. "Did you get the guilt in that one?"

"Guilt?" Duffold repeated.

"He'd been killing soquas," Wintan said. "Naughty thing to do, according to his subconscious, so it punished him." He added, "No luck at all, so far, unless there was something I missed. An orderly, childish mind. No real guile in it--and it does fit the way they look and act."

"Could it be faked?"

"Well," Wintan said, "we couldn't do it. Not to that extent. They'll hit the Deep Downs next, I imagine. Should become more interesting now."

A riot of color blazed up about them--color that was too rich and in meaningless flux and motion, or frozen into patterns that stirred Duffold uncomfortably. Something came to his memory and he turned and spoke in Wintan's direction.

"Yes," Wintan's voice replied, "it's not surprising that it makes you think of some forms of human art. We have a comparable layer." He was silent for a moment. "How do you feel?"

"Slight headache," Duffold said, surprised. "Why?"

"It might affect you that way. Just close your eyes a while. I'll let you know if we run into something significant."

Duffold closed his eyes obediently. Now that his attention was on it, the headache seemed more than slight. He began to massage his forehead with his fingertips. Wintan's voice went on, "It's a nearly parallel complex of mental structures, as one would expect, considering the physical similarities. This particular area originates when the brain's visual centers are developing in the zygote. It's pure visual experience, preceding any outside visual stimulus. Later on, in humans anyway, it can become a fertile source of art ... also of nightmares, incidentally." His voice stopped, then resumed sharply, "Bucheles's tracing something--there!"

Duffold opened his eyes. Instantly, he had a sensation that ~~was~~ pure nightmare--of being sucked forward, swept up and out of his chair, up and into--

The sensation stopped, and a velvety blackness swam in front of him like an intangible screen. He was still in his chair. He drew in a quivering breath. The only reason he hadn't shouted in fright was that he hadn't been capable of making a sound.

"That--!" he gasped.

"Easy," Wintan said quietly. "I've shut you off."

"But that was that keff animal!"

"Something very like it," Wintan said, and Duffold realized that he could see the Service man again now. Wintan was watching something that was behind the area of screening blackness for Duffold, and if he felt any of the effects that had paralyzed Duffold, he didn't show it. He added, "It's very interesting. We'd been wondering about the keff!"

"I thought," Duffold said, "that Palayatans weren't bothered by the animal."

Wintan glanced at him. "Our present Palayatans aren't. Did you notice the stylized quality of that image and the feeling of size--almost like a monument?"

Duffold said shortly that he hadn't been in a frame of mind to observe details. His vulnerability was still irritating. "It looked like a keff to me. Why should it be in this fellow's mind?"

"Ancestral image," Wintan said, "or I miss my guess! And that means--it almost *has* to mean that at one time the Palayatans weren't immune to ... ah, wait!"

"Something new?" Duffold said quickly.

Wintan seemed to hesitate. "Yes," he said.

"Then cut me in again. I don't want to miss more than I have to."

For a moment, Duffold thought Wintan hadn't responded. Then he realized that the blackness before him wasn't quite what it had been a few seconds ago.



He stared uncomprehendingly. An eerie shiver went over him. "What's this?" he demanded, his voice unaccountably low.

"Something really new!" Wintan said quietly. "I think, Excellency, that they've found X!"

For the moment, that seemed to have no meaning to Duffold. The pale thing swimming in the dark before them was roughly circular and quite featureless. He had a feeling it was nothing tangible, a dim light—but his hair was bristling at the back of his neck. The thought came to him that if this was what the projectors were making of the thing that had been tracked down, the mind-machines were as puzzled as he was. "Something really new—" Wintan had said.

He realized that the thing wasn't alone.

To right and left of it, like hounds cautiously circling a strange beast they had overtaken, moved two lesser areas of light. The human

investigators hadn't withdrawn.

They're trying to make contact with it, he thought. And some of the sense of awe and oppression left him. If they could face this strangeness at first hand--

It happened quickly. One of the smaller areas of light moved closer to the large one, hesitated, and moved closer again. And something like a finger of brightness stabbed out from the large one and touched the other.

Instantly, there was only blackness. Duffold heard Wintan catch his breath, and started to ask what had happened. He checked himself, appalled.

A face swam hugely before them. It was Buchele's, and it was the face of a personality sagging out of existence. The eyes were liquid, and the mouth slid open and went lax. Across the fading image flashed something sharp and decisive; and Duffold knew, without understanding how he knew it, that Cabon had given a command and that it had been acknowledged.

In the next instant, as the scene of darkness and its pale inhabitant reshaped itself, he knew also by whom the command had been acknowledged.

"No!" he shouted. He was struggling to get up out of the chair, as Wintan called out something he didn't understand. But it was over by then.

Again there had been three areas of light, two small and one large. Again, a small one came gliding in towards the large one; and again light stabbed out to meet it.

This time, it was like a jarring dark explosion all around him. Dazed, Duffold seemed to hang suspended for a moment over a black pit, and then he was dropping towards it. It was, he sensed suddenly, like dropping into a living volcano. Its terrors, stench, and fury boiled up horribly to engulf him.

4

The office seemed stuffy. Duffold reached back and turned the refresher up a few notches, simultaneously switching the window view to the spaceport section where the shuttles and transports stood ramped. Since he'd got back, that was the only available outside view he'd cared to look at. Except for that guide of Wintan's--Albemarl or whatever his name was--four days ago, no Palayatan ever had been allowed into that area. They hadn't sense enough to

insure they would remain un-cindered there.

He noticed the Service transport had landed at Ramp Thirteen. They were punctual, as usual. A few figures moved about it, too far off to be recognized. Duffold picked up the sheaf of Service reports from a corner of the desk, flicked through them, and hauled out a sheet. There were some points he wanted to refresh his mind on before the coming interview with--well, with whomever it was they'd decided to send down. He hadn't specified Pilch, though he imagined it was the kind of job she would be likely to take on.

He read hurriedly, skipping sections here and there. "... Originally, then, it was the class of creatures of which the present-day keff is the only surviving species that forced the divergence in mental development on the proto-humanoids. Their evolutionary response was a shift of the primary center of awareness from the level of sensory interpretation to that of organic control, which has remained a semiautomatic, unconscious area of mind in any similar species. The telepathic bands on which the keff-like carnivores operated could stimulate only the sensory-response areas of the brain. The controlling central mind of the humanoid was no longer affected by them. The continuing inflow of keff-impulses on the upper telepathic bands became a meaningless irritation, and the brain eventually sealed off its receptors to them....

"To an observer of the period, it might have seemed that the Palayatan humanoid species now had trapped itself in an evolutionary pocket. Animal intelligence must isolate itself from the full effect of the primitive emotional storms of the unconscious if it is to develop rationality and the ability of abstract thought. In doing this, it reduces its awareness of the semiautomatic levels of mind which remain largely in the area of the unconscious. In this case, however, it was losing contact with the level of sensory interpretation which normally is the indicated area of intellectual development.... For many hundreds of thousands of years, the Palayatan humanoid remained superficially an animal. His brain was, in fact, continuing to evolve at a rate comparable to the proto-human one; but the increase in consciousness and potential of organization was being absorbed almost entirely by the internal mind to which he as a personality had retreated...."

Duffold put that sheet down, shook his head, and selected another one. "... The fairly well-developed civilization we now find on Palayata ... of comparatively recent date.... The humanoid being with whom we have become familiar conveniently might be regarded as a secondary personality, subordinate to the internal one. However, the term is hardly more justified than if it were applied to the human sympathetic nervous system....

"The Palayatan superficial mind has become an increasingly complex structure because the details of its required activities are complex. It has awareness of its motivations, but is not aware that an

Internal mind is the source of those motivations. It has no understanding of the fact that its individual desires and actions are a considered factor in the maintenance of the planetary civilization which it takes for granted.

"On the other hand, the internal personality, at this stage of its development, is still capable of only a generalized comprehension of the material reality in which it exists as an organism. It employs its superficial mind as an agent which can be motivated to act towards material goals that will be beneficial to itself and its species. By human standards, the goals have remained limited ones since the possibility of achieving them depends on the actual degree of intelligence developed at present by the superficial minds. They are limited again by the internal minds' imperfect concept of the nature of material reality. As an example, the fact that space might extend beyond the surface of their planet has had no meaning to them, though it has been presented as a theoretical possibility by some abstract thinkers...."

Duffold shoved the sheets back into the stack. He couldn't argue with the reports or with the Service's official conclusion regarding Palayata, and he didn't doubt that the Hub Departments would accept them happily. So we're dealing with a native race of split personalities this time--no matter, so long as the Service guarantees they're harmless! The emotional disturbance they caused human beings couldn't be changed, unfortunately; but any required close contacts could be handled by drug-fortified personnel.

Everybody was going to feel satisfied with the outcome--except Duffold. He was reaching for another section of the reports when the desk communicator murmured softly up at him.

"Oh!" he said. "Why, yes. Send her right in."

He studied Pilch curiously after she was seated. Objectively, she looked as attractive as ever, with her long, clean lines and a profile almost too precisely perfect. Otherwise, she stirred no feeling in him this time; and he was a little relieved about that.

"I understand," she said, "that you weren't entirely pleased with our reports?"

"I did have a few questions," Duffold said. "It was very good of you to come. The original reports, of course, have been transmitted to my headquarters."

She nodded briefly.

"Personally," Duffold said hesitantly, "I find all this a little difficult to believe. Of course, I blacked out before the investigation was concluded. The reports simply state what you found, not how you got the information."

"That's right," said Pilch. "How we got to this wouldn't mean much to someone who wasn't familiar with our methods of operation. What part can't you believe? That the real Palayatan is so far inside himself that he hardly knows we're around when we meet him?"

"Oh, I'll accept that that's the way it is," Duffold said irritably. "But how did you find out?"

"One of those inner minds told us," said Pilch. "Not the one inside Yunnan—he was scared to death by the time we got done with him and yelled for help. So another one reached out far enough from the planet to see what was wrong—a colleague of ours, so to speak. At least, he regards himself as a psychologist—a specialist in mental problems."

Duffold shook his head helplessly.

"Well, it's an odd sort of existence, by our standards," Pilch said. "I don't think I'd go for it myself. But they like it well enough." She thought a moment and added, "The feeling I had was as if you were a deep-sea animal, intensely aware of yourself and of everything else in a big, dark ocean all around you. Actually, there was a sort of richness in the feeling. I'd say their life-experience is at least as varied as the average human one."

"What scared Yunnan?" Duffold asked.

"He knew something was wrong. He didn't realize he'd been removed bodily from the planet, but to use our terms, he felt as if he had suddenly grown almost deaf—and invisible. He couldn't understand the other Palayatans very well anymore, and they didn't seem to be too aware of him. And then our investigators suddenly were *talking* to him! Do you know what human beings seem like to those inside Palayatans? Something like small sleepy animals that have mysteriously turned up in their world. I imagine our degree of organic intelligence can't be too impressive at that! So when two of those animals began to address him—conscious minds like himself, but *not* his kind of mind—Yunnan panicked."

"So he killed Buchele," Duffold said.

Pilch said impassively, "It would be correct to say that Buchele killed himself. There were sections of his mind that he had never been able to accept as part of himself. Buchele was an idealist in his opinion of himself, and in Service work that's a risk. Of course, he had a right to insist on taking that risk if he chose."

"Exactly what did happen to him?" Duffold said carefully.

"The Palayatan jolted a sealed-off section of Buchele's mind into activity, and Buchele met its impact in full consciousness. It killed him."

"No matter how you phrase it," Duffold said, "it seems that one human being, at least, has been murdered by a Palayatan!"

She shook her head. "Not if murder is in the intention. Because it was only trying to frighten Buchele off. It's the way they deal with another mind that is annoying them."

"Frighten him off?" Duffold repeated incredulously.

"Look," Pilch said, "every time you felt that anxiety you mentioned, you'd been jolted by some Palayatan in exactly the same way. Every human being, every intelligent life-form we know about, keeps that stuff out of awareness by layers and layers of mental padding. Our heavy-duty civilized emotions are just trickles of the real thing. It takes the kind of power equipment we have on the ship to drive ourselves down consciously, with full awareness, to the point where we're close enough to it that a Palayatan could topple us in. So it can't ever happen on the planet."

Duffold looked like a man who has suddenly come upon a particularly distasteful notion.

"Some people reported euphorias," he said.

Pilch nodded. "I didn't mention that because I knew you wouldn't care for it. Well, I told you they've been regarding us as some sort of small strange animal. Some of them become quite fond of the little beasts. So they stimulate us pleasantly--till we take a nip out of them or whatever it is we do that annoys them. Tell me something," she went on before he could reply. "Just before you blacked out during the investigation, what were the sensations you hit--terror, self-disgust, rage?"

He looked at her carefully. "Well--all of that," he said. "The outstanding feeling was that I was in close contact with something incredibly greedy, devouring ... foul! I can appreciate Buchele's attitude." He hesitated. "How did it happen that I wasn't aware of what got Buchele?"

"Automatic switch-off for the instant it lasted. It was obvious that it was going over the level of emotional tolerance that had been set for you. We told you there'd be safeguards."

"I see," said Duffold. "Then what about the other thing?"

Pilch looked faintly surprised. "Wintan would have cut you out of it, if he'd had the time," she said. "But obviously you did tolerate it even if you blacked out for a while. That was still well within the safe limit."

Duffold felt a slow stirring of rage. "When you took Buchele's place, it seemed to me that the Palayatan struck at you in the same way he had at Buchele. Is that correct?"

Pilch nodded. "It is."

"But because of your superior conditioning, it didn't disturb you?"

"Not enough to keep me from making use of it," Pilch said.

"In what way?"

"I opened it up on the Palayatan. That," said Pilch, "was when he yelled for help. But it was too bad you picked it up!"

Duffold carefully traced a large, even circle on the desk top with a fingertip. "And you could accept *that* as being part of your mind?" he said with a note of mild wonder. "Well, I suppose you should be congratulated on such an unusual ability."

She looked a little pale as she walked out of the office. But, somehow, Duffold couldn't find any real satisfaction in that.

. . .

Wintan was leaning against the side of the central Outpost building as Pilch came out of the entrance. She stopped short.

"Thought you'd be at the transport," she said.

"I was," Wintan said. "Twelve slightly stunned keffs in good shape have been loaded, and I was making a last tour of the area."

"Albemarl?" she asked as they started walking back to the ramps. "Or the psychologist?"

"Both," Wintan said. "I'd have liked to say good-bye to Albemarl, but there's still no trace of the old tramp anywhere. He'd have enjoyed the keff hunt, too! Too bad he had to wander off again."

"How about the other one?"

"Well, there's very little chance he'll actually contact us, of course," Wintan said. "However"—he held his right hand up—"observe the new wrist adornment! If he's serious about it, that's to help him locate me."

She looked at two polished black buttons set into a metal wrist-strap. "What's it supposed to do?"

"Theoretically, it sets up a small spot of static on *their* awareness band. Tech hasn't had a chance to test it, of course, but it seems to be working. I've been getting some vaguely puzzled looks from our local friends as I wander about, but that's as much interest as they've shown. How did it go with his Excellency?"

"Satisfactorily, I suppose," Pilch said grudgingly. "No heavy dramatics. But for a while there, you know, that little man had me feeling mighty unclean!"

"Self-defense," Wintan said tolerantly. "Give him time to shake it down. Basically, he already knows it was one of his own little emotional volcanoes he dropped into, not yours. But it'll be a year or two before he's really able to admit it to himself, and meanwhile he can let off steam by sitting around and loathing you thoroughly from time to time."

"I read the Predictor's report on him, too," Pilch said. "I still don't agree it was the right way to handle it."

Wintan shrugged. "Cabon can estimate them. If we'd jolted this one much heavier, it might have broken him up. But if the jolt had been a little too light, he could have buried it permanently away and forgotten about it again. As it is, he knows what's inside him, and eventually he'll know it consciously. When he does, he'll be ready for Service work without qualifications--and that means he won't go out some day like Buchele did."

They walked on in silence for a while, through the drifting crowds of visiting Palayatans. Assorted Hub perfumes tinged the air, soft voices chattered amiably, faces turned curiously after the passing humans. "What makes you all so sure Duffold will be back?" Pilch said finally. "Even if he realizes what happened, the rap on the nose he got could be discouraging."

"It could be, for someone else," Wintan said. "But there're some you can't keep away, once they learn where the biggest job really is. For his Excellency, the rap on the nose will turn out eventually to have been Stage One of conditioning."

"Well, maybe. But an idealist like that," said Pilch, "always strikes me as peculiar! They never want to look at the notion that the real reason Man rates some slight cosmic approval is that he can act as well as he does, in spite of the stuff he's evolving from."

"Can't really blame them," Wintan remarked. "As you probably discovered in your own conditioning, some of that stuff just isn't good to look at."

"Now there for once," Pilch agreed darkly, "you spoke a fair-sized truth. Incidentally, that static you're spreading doesn't seem to meet with everyone's approval around here. I've been jolted three times in the last ten seconds."

"Small boy about six steps behind us," Wintan reported. "He's scowling ferociously--but mama's leading him off now. I wonder what he made of it consciously?"

"He'll probably grow up with a vague but firmly held notion that Hub

humans don't smell good," Pilch estimated. They were coming up to a long, low wall from which the ramp-ways led into the sunken take-off section. The crowds were thinning out. "Have you noticed anyone acting as if he might conceivably be our psychologist?"

Wintan said he hadn't. "If he's in the area, as he said he would be, he's still got about ten minutes to make up his mind to go space-faring. Let's stop here and give him a last chance to show up before we go out on the ramp."

They leaned back against the wall surveying passing natives hopefully. "He was excited about the idea at first," Wintan said, "but I imagine it seemed like too big a change when he'd had time to think about it. After all, he would have lost contact with all his kind before the ship was out of the system."

Pilch shivered. "Like a man living in a solitary dream for years, listening to the voices of strange entities. Isn't it odd--two intelligent races, physically side by side, but each blocked from any real contact with the other by the fears of its own mind!"

"It needn't have stayed that way," Wintan said regretfully. "Lord, the things we could have learned! We working down towards his awareness band, and he working up towards ours. Wish we had time to experiment here for a year or so! But the Great God Schedule has got us. It's likely to be a half century before the Service can spare another look at Palayata."

Pilch glanced at her timepiece. "The same Schedule also says we start moving towards Ramp Thirteen right now, Wintan."

They moved, reluctantly. As they came up the stairs to the locked platform gate, a lanky figure that had been sitting beside it stood up without unseemly haste.

Pilch darted a wild glance at Wintan. "Great Suns!" she said as they both came to a stop. Wintan was clearing his throat. "Ah, Albemarl--" His voice sounded shaky. "I greet you!"

"And I greet you, Wintan!" the elderly Palayatan said benignly. "I must ask your forgiveness for not having met you here as I promised, but I have had a very strange experience."

"Ah, yes?" Wintan said.

"Yes, indeed! For forty long years, I have wandered over the face of the world, welcome everywhere because of my great wisdom and the free flow of my advice. When you asked me some time ago whether I would like to enter your ship and go out of the world in it, into that strange emptiness overhead from which you people come, I laughed at you. Because--forgive me again, Wintan--we all think here that it is very foolish to leave a fair and familiar world and the comfort of many, many friends, in order, at best and after a long time, to

reach another world that cannot be so very different, where friends must be made again. Also, you spoke of risks."

"Yes," Wintan said, "there are always risks, of course."

Albemar! nodded. "But on the night after you left," he said, "I had a dream. A strong voice spoke to me, which I know as the voice of my True Self"—Pilch gulped—"and it told me of a thing I had overlooked. I knew then it was true, but it disturbed me greatly. So for these days and nights I have been wandering about the hills, thinking of what it said. But in the end I have come here with a calm heart to ask whether I may now enter the ship and go wandering with you and your friends through all the years and the strangeness that is beyond the world."

"You may, indeed, Albemar!" Wintan said.

"And we leave now? I am ready."

"We leave now." Wintan gave Pilch a look, still incredulous but shining; then he stepped up to the gate and put the ball of his thumb against the lock that would open only to a human pattern.

"Albemar!," Pilch said gently, as the gate hissed open, "would you mind very much telling me what the thing was that you had overlooked?"

Albemar! blinked at her benevolently with his somewhat muddy Palayatan eyes. "Why, not at all. It is a simple thing but a great one—that wisdom accepts no limits. So when a wise man hears of a new thing that may be learned, beyond anything he knew before, it may not seem as comforting as the familiar things he knows, but he must learn it or he will never be content."

Wintan had moved back from the gate to let Pilch through. She put her hand on Albemar!'s elbow and stepped up to the gate with him. Then she stopped.

"After you, brother!" Pilch said.