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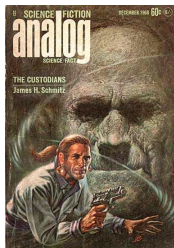
THE CUSTODIANS
James H. Schmitz



"The Custodians"

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The surgically altered alien looked passably human—his terrible danger was neatly camouflaged. He was not, however, alone in being a deadly, camouflaged warrior . . .

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

Illustrated by Kelly Frean

the custodians

McNulty was a Rilf. He could pass for human if one didn't see him undressed; but much of the human appearance of the broad, waxy-pale face and big hands was the result of skillful surgery. Since the Rilf surgeons had only a vague notion of what humans considered good looks, the face wasn't pleasant, but it would do for business purposes. The other Rilf characteristic McNulty was obliged to disguise carefully was his odor—almost as disagreeable to human nostrils as the smell of humans was to him. Twice a day, therefore, he anointed himself with an effective deodorant. The human smells he put up with stoically.

Probably no sort of measures could have made him really attractive to humans. There was nothing too obviously wrong about his motions, but they weren't quite right either. He had an excellent command of English and spoke four other human languages well enough to make himself understood, but always with an underlying watery gurgle which brought something like a giant bullfrog to mind. To some people McNulty was alarming; to others he was repulsive. Not that he cared very much about such reactions. The humans with whom he dealt professionally were not significantly influenced by

them.

To Jake Hiskey, for example, captain and owner of the spaceship *Prideful Sue*, McNulty looked, sounded, and smelled like a million dollars. Which was approximately what he would be worth, if Hiskey managed things carefully for the next few days. Hence the skipper was smiling bemusedly as he poked the door buzzer of McNulty's cabin.

"Who is it?" the door speaker inquired in McNulty's sloppy voice.

"Jake. I've got news--good news!"

The lock snicked and the door swung open for Hiskey. As he stepped through, he saw another door at the far end of the cabin close abruptly. Beyond it were the living quarters of the other Rilf currently on the *Prideful Sue*, who went by the name of Barnes and whose olfactory sense was more seriously affronted by humans than McNulty's. Barnes might be second in command of McNulty's tribe of Rilf mercenaries, or possibly a female and McNulty's mate. Assuming that McNulty was male, which was by no means certain. Rilfs gave out very little information about themselves, and almost all that was known of their species was that it had a dilly of a natural weapon and a strong interest in acquiring human currency with which to purchase advanced products of human technology. Hence the weapon was hired out on a temporary basis to human groups who knew about it and could afford it.

"You will excuse Barnes," McNulty said, looking over at Hiskey from a table where he sat before a tapeviewer. "He is indisposed."

"Of course," said Hiskey. He added curiously, "What are you studying up on now?" McNulty and Barnes never missed an opportunity to gather information pertinent to their profession.

"Recent Earthplanet history," replied McNulty. "The past three years. I must say the overall situation looks most favorable!"

Hiskey grinned. "It sure does! For us...."

McNulty shut off the tapeviewer. "During the past two ship days," he remarked, "I have recorded news reports of forty-two of these so-called miniwars on the planet. Several others evidently are impending. Is that normal?"

"Actually it sounds like a fairly quiet period," Hiskey said. "But we might liven it up!" He pulled out a chair, sat down. "Of course I haven't been near Earthsystem for around eight years, and I haven't paid too much attention to what's been going on here. But on the planet it's obviously the same old stuff. It's been almost a century since the world government fizzled out; and the city states, the rural territories, the sea cities, the domes, the subterraneans and what-not have been battling each other around ever since. They'll go on doing it for quite a while. Don't worry about that."

"I am not worrying," McNulty said. "The employment possibilities here appear almost unlimited, as you assured us they would be. What is this good news of which you spoke, Jake? Have your Earth contacts found a method of getting us down on the planet without further delay?"

"No," said Hiskey. "It will be at least five days before they have everything arranged. They're playing this very quietly. We don't want to alert anybody before you and your boys are set up and ready to go into action."

McNulty nodded. "I understand."

"Now here's what's happened," Hiskey went on. "This station we've stopped at is a branch of Space U. The navigator shuttled over to it half an hour ago to find out where he can get in touch with his sister. She's connected with Space U--a student, I suppose--and, of course, he hasn't seen her for the past eight years."

"She is what is known as a graduate student," said McNulty, who disliked vagueness. "Her name is Elisabeth and she is three Earth years younger than Gage. I heard him discuss the matter with you yesterday, and he mentioned those things specifically."

"I guess he did, at that," said Hiskey. "Anyway, he was told on the Space U station that she's a guest on a private asteroid at present, and he contacted her there by transmitter. The asteroid people offered to pick him up so he could spend a few days with his sister as their guest. Gage called me and I told him to say we'd deliver him to the asteroid's lock in the *Prideful Sue*, since we've got time to kill before we can get scheduled through the System check stations anyway. So that's been arranged. And when we get there, I'll see to it that I'm invited down to the asteroid with Gage."

"That is the good news?" McNulty asked blankly.

Hiskey grinned. "There's a little more to it than that. Did your tapes tell you anything about Earthsystem's asteroid estates?"

"Yes. They were mentioned briefly twice," McNulty said. "I gathered their inhabitants retain only tenuous connections with the planetary culture and do not engage in belligerent projects. I concluded that they were of no interest to us."

"Well, start getting interested," Hiskey told him. "Each of those asteroids is a little world to itself. They're completely independent of both Earthplanet and Earthsystem. They got an arrangement with Earthsystem which guarantees their independent status as long as they meet certain conditions. From what Gage's sister told him, the asteroid she's on is a kind of deluxe spacegoing ranch. It belongs to a Professor Alston ... a handful of people, some fancy livestock, plenty of supplies."

"And what business could we have with such people?" inquired McNulty.

"I think they'll be useful. I told you the one thing that might bug our plans right now is to have the System Police get too curious about the *Prideful Sue* while we're hanging around here for the next five or six days."

"So you did," said McNulty. "And I now have a question about that. According to these tapes, Earthsystem has no jurisdiction over Earthplanet. Why then should the System Police attempt to control or investigate what Earth imports?"

Hiskey shrugged. "For my money they're busybodies. The sp got kicked off Earth for good, something like forty years ago, but it still acts like it's responsible for what happens there. And it's got muscle enough to control the space of the system. Earth doesn't like that but can't do much about it. If the System Police got an idea of why we're bringing in a shipload of Riffs to Earth, they'd never let us go down. As long as we do nothing to make them suspicious, they probably won't bother us—but we can't really count on it. However, if we move the *Prideful Sue* down beneath the force fields around Professor Alston's asteroid, she'll be out of sight and out of the sp's jurisdiction. By Earthsystem's own ruling, they can't bother us even if they have reason to think we're there."

"You believe Professor Alston will permit you to land the ship?"

"No, I doubt he'd extend his hospitality that far. But it'll be difficult for him to avoid inviting me down for an hour or so, as Harold Gage's captain. When I mention we have a very interesting alien on board—first representative of his kind to reach Earthsystem, who has an intellectual curiosity about the human private asteroids—he'll invite you down. Half the crew can crowd into the skiff with you then and stay hidden in it till we want them."

McNulty gurgled interestedly. "You mentioned a handful of people—"

"From all I've heard, there'd be at most fifty even on a really big estate. Probably no more than half that. They don't like to be crowded on the asteroids—one reason most of them got off Earth to start with was that they wanted privacy and one place they could still buy it, if they had money enough, was in space."

"There should be then," said McNulty, "a most efficient and compact system of controls."

"You get the idea, McNulty. Those asteroids are set up like ships. That's what they've been turned into—big ships. Mostly they coast on solar orbit, but they can maneuver to some extent on their own."

"Then, as on a ship," McNulty continued, "the main controls will be concentrated for maximum efficiency within a limited area. It should take us at most an hour or two to gain a practical understanding of

their use and operation."

"Might take you less than that," said Hiskey. Perhaps because of a congenital deficiency in inventive imagination, Rlf technology was at a primitive level as compared with the human one. But there was nothing wrong with their ability to learn, and McNulty, like most of them, was intensely interested in human gadgetry and very quick to grasp its function and principles. There wasn't much about the *Prideful Sue's* working innards he didn't know by now. "We needn't make any final decisions before you and I have checked the situation," Hiskey pointed out. "But it should be a cinch. We take over the control section, block the communication system, and we have the asteroid."

"That part of it may well be easy," McNulty agreed. "However, I would expect serious problems to follow."

"What kind of problems?"

"These asteroid people obviously do not isolate themselves completely from Earthsystem. They converse by transmitter. They receive guests. If these activities suddenly stop and no response is obtained from the asteroid, the System Police certainly should grow suspicious. With or without jurisdiction, they will investigate."

Hiskey shook his head. "No, they won't, McNulty. That's what makes this easy for us."

"Please explain," said McNulty.

"A private asteroid—any private asteroid—is expected to go out of communication from time to time. They're one of Solar U's science projects. They seal their force field locks, shut off their transmitters; and when they open up again is entirely up to them. I've heard some have stayed incommunicado for up to ten years, and the minimum shutoff period's supposed to be not less than one month out of every year. What they're out to prove I don't know. But nobody's going to be upset if they discover suddenly that they're not able to get through to Professor Alston and his asteroid. They'll just settle back to wait until he's open to contact again."

McNulty reflected for a considerable time. "That does indeed sound like a favorable situation," he stated abruptly then. "Excuse us, Jake." He went on, without shifting his eyes from Hiskey's face, in the Rlf speech which sounded more like heavy sloshings of water than anything else. When he paused, Barnes's voice responded in kind from a wall speaker. The exchange continued for a minute or two. Then McNulty nodded ponderously at Hiskey.

"Barnes agrees that your plan is an excellent one, Jake. The elimination of the humans now in possession of the asteroid should present no great difficulty."

Hiskey looked startled. "I hadn't planned on killing them unless they

try to give us a fight."

"Oh, but killing them is quite necessary," McNulty said.

"Why? We'll need the place only a few days."

"Jake, consider! On the ship which has trailed yours to Earthsystem and is now stationed outside it beyond the patrol range of the System Police are fifty-five Rilfs and their equipment—our army. Four of them have been humanized in appearance as Barnes and I are. The others are obviously not human. The System Police must not be permitted to encounter them."

"Of course not," Hiskey agreed. "But if we're prepared to whisk them down to Earth as soon as they move into the system, the sp isn't going to have time to encounter them."

"I understand," McNulty said. "However, your plan gives us the opportunity to cover ourselves against any deceit or treachery which might be considered by our Earth employers. With perhaps a third of our army left waiting in space, prepared to act, nobody will attempt to renege on contracted payments. And where could a better concealed base be found for our reserve and their ship than such an asteroid, only a few hours from Earth? And we can't afford to have prisoners on that base who would have to be constantly and closely guarded to make sure they cause no trouble. There is too much at stake."

Hiskey said slowly, "Yeah. I guess I see your point."

"Nor," continued McNulty, "can we destroy some and spare others. A single surviving witness might become most inconvenient eventually. Therefore, we must also kill Gage's sister. Since Gage will make a great deal of money as a participant in our operation, he may not object too strongly to that."

Hiskey stared at him for a moment.

"Some things you just don't get, McNulty," he remarked. "Harold Gage is going to object like hell to having his sister killed!"

"He will? Well, I must accept your opinion on the point," said McNulty. "It follows then—"

"I know. We'd have had to get rid of Gage anyway. He wouldn't go along with taking over the asteroid even if his sister weren't there and it wasn't a killing job. We were friends once, but he's been giving me a lot of trouble like that. Now we're in Earthsystem, we don't need a navigator. He goes with the asteroid people."

"That will not cause trouble among your men?"

Hiskey shook his head. "He hasn't had a friend on board for the past two years. We needed him, that's all. If he's eliminated, everybody gets that much better a split. There'll be no trouble."

"I'd gained the impression," McNulty observed, "that he was a rather dangerous person."

"He's a bad boy to go up against with a gun," Hiskey said. "But he won't be wearing guns on a friendly visit to a private asteroid, will he? No, you needn't worry about Gage."

McNulty said he was glad to hear it. He added, "There is, incidentally, an additional advantage to disposing of the asteroids humans. Before I demonstrate the tozies to our prospective employers, they should be exercised. At present, after their long idleness on shipboard, they have become sluggish."

Hiskey grimaced. "I thought those things were always ready to go...."

"No. Permit me." McNulty reached into the front of his coat, paused with his hand just out of sight, made an abrupt shrugging motion. For an instant there was a glassy glittering in the opening of the coat. Then it was gone, and something moved with a hard droning sound along the walls of the cabin behind Hiskey. He sat very still, not breathing, feeling blood drain slowly from his face.

"Do not be disturbed, Jake," said McNulty. "The drug I give you and your crew makes you as immune as a Riff to the tozies' killing reaction." He lifted his hand. "Ah, now! It becomes conditioned. It adjusts! We no longer hear it."

The drone was thinning to a whisper, and as McNulty stopped speaking, there was a sudden complete silence. But the unseen thing still moved about the cabin. Hiskey felt abrupt brief stirrings of air to right and left of his face, as if the tozie were inspecting him; and in spite of McNulty's assurance he sat frozen and rigid.

"Well, enough of this," McNulty said. Hiskey didn't know what means the Riff had of summoning the tozie back to him, but for a moment he saw it motionless on the front of McNulty's coat, a clinging glassy patch about the size of a man's hand. Then it disappeared beneath the coat and McNulty closed the coat, and Hiskey breathed again.

"That illustrates my point," McNulty told him. "The tozie remained audible while I might have counted to twenty, slowly. They are all like that now."

Hiskey wiped his forehead. "If they adjust in a few seconds, I can't see it makes much practical difference."

McNulty shook his head reprovingly.

"Those few seconds might give someone time to be warned, find shelter, and escape, Jake! In a tozie attack there should be no escape for foreign life which is not already behind thick walls or enclosed in strong armor. That is the beauty of it! On my last contract I was in a crowd of alert armed men when I released my tozies. In

an instant the air was full of a thousand invisible silent knives, striking simultaneously. Some of the humans gasped as they died, but there were no screams. A clean piece of work! That is how it must be when we demonstrate the toziens to our Earth employers. And since I will be the demonstrator, I shall blood my swarm on the asteroid, on its humans and their livestock, and then they will be ready again."

"Well, that part of it is your business," Hiskey said, rather shakily.

. . .

Along the perennial solar orbit it shared with Earthplanet, the Alston asteroid soared serenely through space. Earth was never visible from the asteroid because the sun remained between them. The asteroid's inhabitants had no regrets about that; they were satisfied with what they could see, as they might be. The surface of what had been a ragged chunk of metal and mineral had been turned into an unobtrusively cultivated great garden. The outer atmosphere was only two hundred yards thick, held in by a shell of multiple force fields; but looking up, one would have found it difficult to say how it differed from the day and night skies of Earth. Breezes blew and clouds drifted; and a rainfall could be had on order. And if clouds, breezes, sky blueness, and rainfall weren't entirely natural phenomena, who cared? Or, at least, cared very much....

It had cost a great deal of money initially to bring the asteroid over from the Belt and install the machines which transformed its surface into a facsimile section of Earth, planted Earth gravity at its core, set it on Earth's orbit and gave it measured momentum and a twenty-four hour spin. It cost considerably more money to bring in soil, selected plants, selected animals, along with all the other appurtenances of enclosed but very comfortable and purposeful human habitation and activity. But once everything had been set up, it cost nothing to keep the asteroid going. It was self-powered, very nearly self-maintaining and self-sustaining. A variety of botanical projects initiated by Professor Derek Alston, its present owner, incidentally produced crops of spices disposed of in Earthsystem, which more than covered current expenses.

On this morning Derek Alston sat cross-legged by the side of a miniature lake, listening to and sometimes taking part in the conversation between his wife Sally and Sally's friend, Elisabeth Gage. Sally was a slightly tousled bronze blonde and Elisabeth had straight long jet-black hair sweeping about her shoulders, but Derek kept noticing points of resemblance between the two, in structure, motions, and mannerisms, almost as if they had been rather closely related, say first cousins. Though they were, Derek thought, in fact simply two excellent examples of the type of tall comely young women Earthsystem seemed to produce in increasing numbers each year. They had been fellow students at Solar U before Sally's marriage a little less than a year ago now, and, until Elisabeth arrived

yesterday day at the asteroid, they hadn't met in person since then. From what Sally had told him, Derek already knew a good deal about Elisabeth before he saw her.

The talk, naturally, mainly was about Elisabeth's brother who should reach the asteroid in another hour or so. There was, Derek knew, in what was being said and in what was not being said between these two, a trace of awkwardness and uncertainty. Essentially, of course, it was an occasion for festivities and rejoicing. Elisabeth was happy. There was no question about that. Her face was filled with her reflections ... dreamy dazed smiles, cheeks glowing, eyes brimming briefly now and then. Her brother was the only surviving member of her family, and they'd been very close throughout her childhood. And now there'd been eight years of separation, and she hadn't known until Harold called that he'd come back to Earthsystem, or was even planning to come back. She'd had no reason to expect him. So she was happy, melting in happiness in fact. And Sally shared sympathetically in her friend's feelings.

But there was the other side to this matter. It wasn't to be mentioned now, but it couldn't be dismissed either....

. . .

"His voice hasn't changed at all—" Elisabeth had just said. There was a tiny silence then, because she had touched, inadvertently, the other side of the matter, and it seemed to Derek the right moment to speak.

"Only twenty-eight years old," he remarked. "Your brother's very young to have put eight years of outsystem travel behind him."

Elisabeth looked at him a moment and smiled. "Yes, I suppose he is," she said. "He was just twenty when he was graduated from navigation school at the sp Academy. Dad was with the sp in Mars Underground, and I know he thought Harold would stay with the force. But after Dad died, Earthsystem looked too tame to Harold. He wanted real adventure and he wanted to make his fortune. Captain Hiskey was putting together his crew just then, and Harold signed as navigator. The pay wasn't much, but the crew was to share in ship's profits." She gave a small shrug. "I'm afraid Harold hasn't made his fortune yet, but he's certainly had adventures. Even from the little he's told me, I know the ship often must have been doing very risky work."

"What were Captain Hiskey's qualifications for that kind of work—for outsystem commerce generally?" Derek asked.

Elisabeth's eyes flickered. "Harold said Hiskey had been first officer on a big transsolar transport. Then he got money enough to buy his own ship." She hesitated. "I guess they've tried about anything they could. But they never had a good enough streak of luck to do much better than break even ... or else they'd get good luck mixed up with

bad. Perhaps Harold will stay in Earthsystem now. But I have a feeling he won't. He was always very stubborn when he set himself a goal."

"You heard from him regularly?"

"No, not regularly. Not very often either. I've had seven message-packs from him in eight years. Somebody would get back to Earthsystem and drop the pack off at Mars Underground or Solar U, and I'd receive it that way. The last one was just six months ago. It didn't say a word about the ship coming back. That's why I can still hardly believe Harold's here."

The eyes had begun to brim again. Sally said quickly, "Perhaps he wasn't sure he'd be coming back and didn't want to build up your hopes."

Elisabeth nodded. "I suppose that was it. And...."

Derek drew back mentally from what she was saying. An independent outsystem trader--not a very large ship, from what Elisabeth had told them. A crew working mainly on a gamble, willing to try anything, each man out to make his fortune, hit the big money by some means. At least some of the men on Captain Hiskey's ship had pursued that objective for eight years without getting there.

Man played it dirty and rough on Earth, held back only by a few general rules which none dared break. In the outsystems the same games were played, as extensions of those on Earth, perhaps somewhat dirtier and rougher, with no enforceable rules of any kind. Drop an adventurous, eager twenty-year-old into that kind of thing after the quiet order of Mars Underground, the disciplines of the sp Academy ... well, it might shape the twenty-year-old in one way or another, but shape him it would, thoroughly and fast, if he was to survive. Eight years should have worked quite a few changes in Harold Gage. The changes needn't have been evident in the message-packs Elisabeth had received. But she was intelligent, and she knew in general what the outsystems were like. And so, unwillingly, she was apprehensive of what she would find in her brother.

It bothered Derek because he liked Elisabeth and thought that whatever her expectations were, she might still be in for a shock. He checked his watch, got to his feet, smiled at his wife and guest, and excused himself. A few minutes later, seated at a transmitter, he dialed a number.

"Lieutenant Pierce," a voice said. "Who is calling?"

"This is Derek Alston, Mike."

"And what can the System Police do for Professor Alston today?" asked Michael Pierce.

"Do you have anything on an outsystem tramp trader called *Prideful Sue*? Captain-owner's name is Hiskey. He might have checked in a day or two ago."

"Hold on," Pierce told him.

Perhaps a minute passed before his voice resumed. "There's a ship by that name and of that description in the territory, Derek. She's Earthplanet registry. Last sp check was ten years ago. No record of present owners. First reported as having arrived from transsolar three days ago. We have a mild interest in the ship because the captain evidently has no intention of checking in or going through Customs. Of course, an sp check isn't compulsory if his business is only and directly with Earthplanet and if we have no reason to suspect Class a contraband. However, he keeps shifting about the system as if he preferred to keep out of our way. Do you feel we should give him more attention?"

"I have no definite reason to think so," Derek said. "But possibly you should."

. . .

A number of things were disturbing Harold Gage. One of them was that Jake Hiskey had invited himself down on the asteroid with him. Jake had made no mention of such plans until the *Prideful Sue* eased in to a stop on the coordinates given them in the Alston asteroid's gravity field and went on space anchor. Then Harold came forward to the comm room; and there was Jake, freshly shaved and in dress uniform, talking to the Alstons on viz screen. The matter was already settled. How Jake wrangled the invitation Harold didn't know, but he was downright charming when he wanted to be; and undoubtedly he'd made the Alstons feel it would be impossibly rude not to include him in the party. Jake switched off the screen, looked at Harold's face, and grinned.

"Hell, Harold," he said. "You're not begrudging an old friend a few hours' look at sheer luxury, are you?"

"No," Harold said. "But in this case I felt I was already imposing on Elisabeth's friends."

"Ah--don't be so sensitive. They invited you, didn't they? And Professor Alston and that sweet-looking wife of his will get a boot out of me. These millionaire hermits must get mighty bored on their pretty-pretty asteroids where nothing ever happens. We're transsolar spacers, man! We've been places and done things it would curl their hair to think about. We're romantic!" He clapped Harold on the shoulder. "Come on! They told me your sister's waiting at the lock. Hey, this is one place we don't have to wear guns when we stick our noses outside--seems odd, doesn't it?"

And then they were down; and there, first of all, was Elisabeth—not a girl any more but, startlingly, a beautiful woman. Harold wasn't even sure he would have recognized her if she hadn't run towards him, laughing and crying a little, as he stepped out of the skiff, and clung to him for long seconds. And there were the Alstons, pleasant people who immediately took Jake in hand and smoothly dissociated him and themselves from the Gages, so that in only minutes Harold and Elisabeth were wandering about alone in this sunlit, rather dreamlike garden of an asteroid.

He'd been afraid there'd be an awkwardness between them, but none developed. Elisabeth was a completely honest person, of the kind whose expression hides nothing because there is rarely anything in their minds they want to hide. She studied him frankly and gravely, his eyes, his mouth, his motions, listened to his voice and its inflections, her face telling him meanwhile that she realized he'd changed and something of the manner in which he'd changed, and that she was accepting it, perhaps with regret but without judgment and with no loss of affection. He knew, too, that this was a matter it wouldn't be necessary to talk about, now or later ... later meaning after the business on Earthplanet was concluded. What was left then was that he always would have to be a little careful of what he said to her, careful not to reveal too much. Because what Elisabeth didn't know, couldn't possibly know, was just how extensive the change had been.

He told himself it couldn't have been helped. In the outsystems it could hardly have worked out otherwise. For a while they'd remained fairly selective about what they did with the *Prideful Sue*. If a job looked too raw, they didn't touch it. But they weren't making money, or not enough, and the raw jobs began to look less unacceptable. Then some of the crew dropped out, and some got killed, and the replacements were outsystem boys with outsystem ideas. On occasion they'd come close to straight raiding then; and if it had been up to Jake Hiskey alone, what difference was left finally mightn't have mattered enough to count.

But a first-class navigator was the most valuable man on the ship in the outsystems; and Harold was a first-class navigator by then. If he hadn't been one, he still would have been the most valuable man on the *Prideful Sue*; Hiskey had come to depend on him more and more. So he could put a stop to an operation if it looked too bad, and from time to time he did. It didn't get him liked on board; but, as it happened, he'd also developed a first-class gun hand. If necessary the hand might get a little more blood on it, and Navigator Gage would get his way.

This last move now, the big one, the one which was to make the whole past eight years pay off extremely well, importing McNulty's mercenaries and their devastating weapon, the Rlf toziens, to Earthplanet—he'd thought about it long and hard and had been at the point of backing out more than once. Hiskey, whose idea it had been, argued that it was a perfectly legitimate enterprise. It was,

without question. Earthplanet's criterion of permissible weaponry was the guaranteed limitation of effect. A tozien strike had an active period of less than two days, a target radius of less than twenty miles. It fell well within the allowable range.

And it would have the value of a completely unexpected innovation. Earthplanet hadn't yet heard of the Rilfs. Hiskey had contacts who knew how to handle this kind of thing to best advantage all around. Everyone involved would share in the cut, and the cut was going to be a very large one. Of course, after the first dozen miniwars came to an abrupt end, that part of it would be over. McNulty would be in general demand and could get along without middlemen. There'd be no further payoffs to the crew of the *Prideful Sue*. But down to the last man on board, they'd be more than wealthy enough to retire.

It was, Jake Hiskey pointed out, no more of a dirty business, if one wanted to call it that, than other operations they'd carried out. The Earth gangs periodically slaughtered one another, and there was very little to choose between them. What great difference did it make to hand some of them a new weapon?

It wasn't much of an argument, but what decided Harold was that this was Jake Hiskey's last chance and that Jake knew it and was desperate. He was fifteen years older than Harold and looked a decade older than that. The outsystems had leached his nerve from him at last. If Harold pulled out, Hiskey wouldn't be able to handle the deal with the Rilfs, wouldn't be able to work a troop of them back to Earthsystem. He was no longer capable of it. And when one had flown and fought a ship for eight years with a man, had backed him and been backed by him in tight spots enough to do for a lifetime, it was difficult to turn away from him when he was finished. So all right, Harold had thought finally, one more play, dirty as it might be. Then he and Jake could split. There was nothing really left of their friendship; that had eroded along the line. If the sp didn't manage to block them, they'd get the Rilfs to Earth. Afterwards they couldn't be touched by Earthsystem, even if it became known what role they'd played. They'd have done nothing illegal.

And he could hope the role they'd played wouldn't become known. He'd told Elisabeth the *Prideful Sue* had returned to Earthsystem on very big and very hush-hush business, something he wasn't free to talk about, and that if the deal was concluded successfully he might be taking a long vacation from spacefaring. She seemed delighted with that and didn't ask for details, and Harold inquired what she'd been doing these eight years, because none of the message-packs she'd sent ever had caught up with him, and soon Elisabeth was talking and laughing freely and easily. For a short while, the past years seemed almost to fade, as if they were strolling about a park in Mars Underground rather than on this fabulous garden asteroid where handsome horned beasts stepped out now and then from among the trees to gaze placidly at them as they went by....

• • •

"Mr. Gage! Elisabeth!"

He stopped, blinking. It was like an optical illusion. There was a steep smooth cliff of rock to the left of the path they were following; and in it, suddenly, an opening had appeared, a doorway, and Sally Alston had stepped out of it and was coming towards them, smiling. "I looked for you in the scanners," she told Elisabeth. Then she turned to Harold. "Mr. Gage, why didn't you let us know you had this extraordinary alien person on board? If Captain Hiskey hadn't mentioned--"

"Alien person?" Elisabeth interrupted.

"Why, yes! Somebody called a Rilf. Derek is certain Solar U has no record of the species, and Captain Hiskey and Mr. Gage are taking him to Earthplanet on a commercial mission for his people. It's really an historical event!"

Harold stared at her, completely dumbfounded. Had Jake gone out of his mind to mention McNulty and the Rilfs to the Alstons? Elisabeth gave him a quick glance which asked whether this was the big hush-hush business he'd been talking about.

"He's even given himself a human name," Sally told Elisabeth. "McNulty!" She smiled at Harold. "I must admit I find him a little shivery!"

"He's *here*?" Harold heard himself saying. "McNulty's here, on the asteroid?"

"Of course! We invited him down. When Captain Hiskey--"

"How long's he been here?"

She looked at him, startled by his tone. "Why, about twenty minutes. Why?"

"No," Harold said. "Don't ask questions." He took each of them by an arm, began to walk them quickly towards the opening in the cliff. "Do you know exactly where McNulty is at the moment?"

"Well, they--my husband and Captain Hiskey and McNulty probably are in the control room now. McNulty was saying how interested he'd be in seeing how the asteroid was operated."

That tied it. "You didn't send up for him?" Harold asked. "The ship's skiff brought him down?"

"Yes, it did. But what is the matter, Mr. Gage? Is--"

"And the skiff's still here?" Harold said. "It's inside the field lock?"

I suppose so. I don't know.

"All right," Harold said. He stopped before the opening. "Now listen carefully because we're not likely to have much time!" He drew a quick deep breath. "First, where is the control room?"

"In the building in the space lock section," Sally said. "The administration building. You saw it when you came down." They were watching him, expressions puzzled and alarmed.

Harold nodded. "Yes, I remember. Now—you and everyone else on the asteroid is in very serious danger. McNulty is a real horror. He has a special weapon. The only way you can stay reasonably safe from it is to hide out behind good solid locked doors. I hope you'll have some way of warning Professor Alston and whoever else is around to do the same thing. Anyone who's in the open, isn't behind walls, when McNulty cuts loose won't have a chance. Not for a moment! Unless he belongs to the *Prideful Sue's* crew. If you can get to a transmitter in the next few minutes, call the sp and tell them to come here and get in any way they can—in space armor. But transmitters aren't going to stay operable very long. You'll have to hurry." He looked at their whitened faces. "Don't think I'm crazy! The only reason Hiskey would have told you about McNulty, and the only reason McNulty would have showed himself, is that they've decided between them to take over the place."

"But why?" cried Sally.

"Because we're the next thing to lousy pirates. Because they think they can use this asteroid." Harold started to turn away. "Now get inside, seal that door tight, move fast, and with luck you'll stay alive."

So this was one place guns wouldn't be needed! In mentioning that, Jake Hiskey had made sure his navigator wouldn't—quite out of habit and absentmindedly—be going down armed to the peaceful Alston asteroid and to the reunion with his sister. *He knew this was a job I couldn't buy*, Harold thought. *Even if Elisabeth hadn't been involved.*

He'd set off at a long lope as soon as the camouflaged door in the cliff snapped shut. The asteroid surface in this area was simulated hilly ground, slopes rising and dipping, occasional smooth slabs of meteorite rock showing through. Clusters of trees, shrubby, cultivated grassy ground.... The space lock section couldn't be more than a few hundred yards away, but he couldn't see it from here. Neither could anyone in the open see him approaching. Sally Alston had said she'd located them by using scanners. Hiskey and McNulty could spot him by the same means, but they wouldn't be looking for him before they'd secured the control room. Standard raiding procedure ... hit the nerve center of an installation as quickly as possible; take it, and the rest is paralyzed, helpless, silenced.

He checked an instant. A curious sensation, like a vibrating pressure on his eardrums, a tingling all through his nerves; it continued a few

seconds, faded, returned, faded again ... and the herd came suddenly around the side of the hill ahead of him. Some fifteen large gray-brown animals, a kind of antelope with thick corkscrew horns, running hard and fast. In the moment he saw them, startled, he took it for an indication that McNulty had released the toziens--and knew immediately it wasn't that. Nothing ran from toziens; there was no time. The herd crossed his path with a rapid drumming of hoofs, pounded through thickets, wheeled and appeared about to slam head-on into a vertical cliff wall. At the last moment an opening was there in the rock, similar to the one out of which Sally Alston had stepped, five or six times as wide. The beasts plunged through it, shouldering and jostling one another, and the opening vanished behind the last of them.

It all seemed to have happened in an instant. He ran on, wondering. That odd sensation, switching on and off--an alert signal? An alarm to which even the animals here were conditioned to respond immediately, in a predetermined manner, a "take cover!" that cleared the surface level of anything capable of reacting to it in moments ... it indicated a degree of efficiency and preparedness he wouldn't have attributed to these asteroid dwellers. What sort of emergencies could they expect here?

He saw no more fleeing beasts, or any beasts at all; and in perhaps another minute the tingling irritation in his nerves had ended. The space lock section couldn't be far away. He'd been cutting across the slopes, avoiding the leisurely winding and intersecting paths along which he'd come with Elisabeth, and keeping to cover when it didn't slow him down. At last then, coming out of a grove of trees on the crest of one of the little hills, he saw the administration building ahead--or rather one corner of it, warm brown, edged with gleaming black, the rest concealed behind trees. There was no one in sight, but he moved cautiously now, staying within the shrubbery. A hundred feet on, he came to a point which overlooked the landing area beneath the space lock. The *Prideful Sue's* skiff stood in the center of the area, entry port open. Otherwise the section looked deserted.

Above the skiff nothing showed but the simulated Earth sky. If the space lock through the energy carriers englobing the asteroid had been activated, it would have been visible--a ring of frozen fire from below, a glowing cylinder from where Harold stood, the cylinder's thickness depending on the degree to which the lock was expanded. Undoubtedly it could be expanded enough to let in the *Prideful Sue*, and undoubtedly Hiskey had just that in mind. But whatever else he might have accomplished so far, he hadn't yet got around to bringing down the ship.

The skiff wasn't large, but eight or nine men with raiding gear--about half the crew--could have been crammed in with McNulty and left waiting in concealment until they received Hiskey's signal to emerge and go into action. The open entry lock indicated they'd already received the signal, were now inside the administration building. In

other words, at some point within the past few minutes the attack on the asteroid had begun. Barnes, the second Rilf, and the rest of the crew were still on the ship. If they joined the group on the asteroid, the situation might become nearly hopeless. As things stood, it seemed quite bad enough, but at least there'd been no sign as yet of the Rilf toziens. It was possible that if Jake Hiskey met no significant resistance from Alston's people, he would prefer not to turn this into a killing operation.

But he'll want to get me in any case, Harold thought. To keep me from interfering....

They hadn't had time to try to locate him with scanners, but somebody might have been posted outside the administration building to ambush him if he showed up here. The most likely spot for a watcher seemed the cluster of trees and bushes which screened the building.



A blue and golden bird twice the size of a pigeon burst out of the undergrowth six feet ahead and launched itself upwards with a strong beat of wings. Startled—that might easily have advertised his approach—Harold dropped to a deep crouch, glancing after the bird. It rose swiftly to a point about thirty feet above the ground. There something struck and destroyed it.

It seemed as abrupt as an explosion. The flying shape changed to sprays of blood and colorful ribbons and rags which were slashed and scattered again and again in the same instant, then left to fall back to earth. *So it was a killing operation after all, and McNulty had turned loose his toziens.* Not, of course, all of them. There were thousands packed away in his thick nonhuman thorax; and only a small fraction of that number were required to sweep the surface of the asteroid and any sections of the interior open to intrusion clear of animal life large enough to attract their attention. They could have been released only moments ago or he would have been made

aware of their presence—as he was aware of it now. An eerie whispering about him, now here, now there, as the toziens darted down in turn in their invisible speed towards this living flesh, sensed the Rilf drug which protected him as it protected all those who manned the *Prideful Sue*, and swerved away. But everyone else on the asteroid who had not found shelter had died or was dying in these seconds.

Starting forwards again, he shut that thought away. Jake Hiskey and McNulty, having begun the slaughter, would finish it. They'd be in the control room at present, securing their hold on the asteroid. That done, they'd bring in the ship and start looking for holed-up survivors.

. . .

The man Hiskey had selected to act as lookout at the building was Tom Connick. Not the brightest, but an excellent shot and normally steady as a rock—a good choice as an assassin. He stood, screened by a thicket, thirty feet from what seemed to be the only entrance into the building, a gun ready in his hand. They knew Harold wasn't armed; and if he wanted to get into the administration building, he'd have to come past the thicket, within easy range for Connick. It must have seemed as simple as that.

McNulty's toziens, however, had provided a complication. Connick's usual calm was not in evidence. He kept making small abrupt motions, bobbing his head, flinching right or left, jerking up the gun and putting it down again. Harold could appreciate his feelings. He, too, was still drawing the interest of the invisible swarm; every few seconds there would be a momentary indication that a tozien was nearby, and each time his flesh crawled though he knew, as Connick did, that theoretically they were protected from the little horrors. The thought remained that some tozien or other might not realize in time that they were protected. But at present that was all to his advantage. Connick darted glances this way and that, now and then half turning to see what was in back of him; but he was looking for the wrong kind of danger. So in the end Harold rose quietly from the undergrowth ten steps behind Connick with a sizable rock in either hand.

He lobbed the left-hand rock gently upwards. It lifted in a steep arc above Connick's head and came down in front of him. And, for a moment, Connick's nerves snapped. He uttered a frightened sound, a stifled squeal, jabbed the gun forward, shoulders hunching, attention frozen by the deadly dark moving thing which had appeared out of nowhere. It was doubtful whether he even heard the brief rustle of the thicket as Harold came up behind him. Then the edge of the second rock smashed through his skull.

And now there was a gun for Harold, and for Jake Hiskey one man less he might presently send out to look for surviving asteroid

people. Harold found a recharger for the gun in one of Connick's pockets. There'd been some question in his mind whether there mightn't be a second man around, though he had studied the vicinity thoroughly before moving in on Connick. But nothing stirred, so Connick's death had not been observed. He could expect to find somebody else stationed inside the building entrance, as a standard precaution.

He started quickly towards the building, then checked. On the far side of the space lock area there was a faint greenish shimmering in the air, which hadn't been there before. Harold stared at it sharply, looked around. Behind him, too, much closer, barely a hundred feet away--like a nearly invisible curtain hanging from the simulated sky, fitted against the irregularities of the ground below. He pointed Connick's gun into the air, triggered it for an instant. There was a momentary puff of brightness as the charge hit the immaterial curtain. More distantly to the right, and beyond the administration building to the left, was the same shimmering aerial effect.

Energy screens. Activated within the past few minutes. By whom? They enclosed the space lock section, boxed it in. If they'd been thrown up before the tozien swarm appeared in the section, then McNulty's weapon was still confined here unless it had found an entry to the asteroid's interior from within the building. And the screens might have gone up just in time to do that; he'd been too involved in his wary approach to the building area to have noticed what happened behind him. There was suddenly some real reason for hope ... because this fitted in with the silently pervasive alert signal which had come so quickly after his warning to Sally Alston, with concealed doors opening and closing on the surface and animals streaming off it into the interior. The asteroid had defenses, and somebody was using them--which did not make it any less urgent to do something about the *Prideful Sue's* crew and its Rlf allies before the defenses were broken down.

. . .

There was someone waiting inside the entrance. It was Dionisio.

"What's slowing you men down in there, Dionisio?" Navigator Gage demanded curtly, striding towards him. "Why aren't you moving?"

Dionisio was considerably more intelligent than Connick, but, besides being also badly fretted by the toziens, he was, for a moment, confused. He'd been told the navigator was among those to get it here; but he'd also been told that the navigator was unarmed and had no idea of what was going to happen. And here the navigator came walking up, casually holding a gun at half-ready, looking annoyed and impatient, which was standard for him on an operation, and sounding as if he were very much in on the deal. And, of course, there was the further consideration that the navigator was

an extremely fast and accurate man with a gun. So Dionisio blinked, licked his lips, cleared his throat, finally began, "Well ... uh--"

"The skipper's got the control room cleaned up?"

"Well, sir, I guess so."

"You guess so?"

"I wasn't there," Dionisio said sullenly, eyes fixed with some nervousness on the gun Navigator Gage was waving around rather freely. "I was in the skiff. There was that funny feeling we all got. Right after that we got the skipper's signal. So we came out. The skipper tells us to start looking around for the people."

"The people in the building?"

"Uh-huh. The skipper and McNulty were in the control room. There were five, six of the people here with them. And then the skipper looks around, and there's nobody there."

The navigator's lip curled. "You're implying they disappeared? Just like that?"

"Looks like it," said Dionisio warily.

"Everybody in the building?"

"Uh-huh."

"So what are they doing in there now?"

"Blowing in the walls. Looking for, uh, doors."

"Looking for doors!" repeated Navigator Gage, total disgust in his voice. "And what are you doing up here?"

Dionisio swallowed. "I'm to, uh, look out to see if somebody comes."

"With the toziens around? You out of your mind? Who's in the skiff? Have the rest of them come down from the ship?"

"No. There's nobody in the--"

And then Dionisio stopped talking and twitched his gunbarrel up very quickly. Because Navigator Gage had glanced back towards the skiff out in the landing area just then; and while this was a kind of odd situation, Dionisio was positive the skipper anyhow wanted Navigator Gage dead, and he himself had no slightest use for the navigator. So up came the gun, and it was Dionisio who was dead in the same moment, because Navigator Gage had, after all, not glanced away to the extent of not being able to catch the motion.

Beyond the entry a lit hallway extended back into the building. Harold thought he'd heard distant human voices in there while he was talking to Dionisio, but at the moment there was silence. He checked quickly through the man's gear, found a folded gas-breather and fitted that over his face. He took off his suit coat, put on Dionisio's faded brown jacket, slapped Dionisio's visor cap on his head, and set it at the jaunty angle Dionisio favored. As he finished, there was a remote heavy thump from within the building, followed in seconds by another. Jake Hiskey was still having holes blown out of the walls, looking for the hidden passages through which Professor Alston and the people working in the administration building had vanished when they got the alert signal. He should find them if he kept at it long enough. And as soon as they had the space lock controls figured out, they'd haul down the *Prideful Sue* with the heavier raiding equipment she carried.

Dionisio's gun was the only other useful item here. Harold pocketed it, pulled the body over against the entry wall where it wouldn't be visible from within the building, and set off quickly along the long hallway. Glassy motion flickered for an instant before his eyes; the toziens were still around. Now a series of five doors on the right—all locked. Ahead the hall made a turn to the right. As he came towards the corner, he heard men's voices again, at least three or four, mingled in a short burst of jabbering, harsh with excitement. Hiskey's voice among them? The ammonia smell of jolt bombs began to tingle faintly in his nostrils.

He went around the corner without hesitating or slowing his stride. The gas-breather covered half his face; and while Dionisio was about an inch shorter, they were similar enough in general build that he could be accepted as Dionisio for a few moments by men with their attention on other things. Sixty feet ahead, rubble covered the hall floor, chunks of colorful plastic masonry shaken by jolt bombs out of a great jagged hole in the left wall. Only two men in sight, standing waiting in tensed attitudes behind a semiportable gun pointed at the hole. Jake Hiskey's voice now, raw with impatient anger: "Hurry it up! Hurry it up!" A glow spilled from the hole and there was the savage hiss of cutters. Bomb fumes hung thick in the air. Hiskey and at least four of the crew here. *Wait till you're right among them.*

One of the men at the semiportable glanced around as Harold came up, looked away again. He went past them. The hole drove deep into the wall; evidently they'd uncovered a passage but found it sealed a few yards farther on, and the sealing material was holding. Three men were at work in there with Hiskey. The cutters blazed and a broken conduit spat vicious shorted power.... And what damn fool had left two unused jolt bombs lying on this boulder of plastic? Harold scooped them up in passing, glanced back and saw Hiskey staring open-mouthed over at him, then clawing for his gun.

Harold dropped behind the boulder, thumbed the stud on one of the

little bombs and pitched it over into the opening of the hole. The second one went in the general direction of the semiportable. Their successive shock waves rammed at his eardrums, lifted the boulder against him. Clouds of dust filled the hall. After a moment he took out one of his guns and stood up.

They lay where the double shock had caught and battered them. Hiskey had been coming for him, had nearly reached the boulder when he was smashed down. Harold looked at the bloodied head and was surprised by a wash of heavy regret, a brief but intensely vivid awareness of that bright yesterday in which Jake Hiskey and he first swung their ship out past the sun, headed towards high adventure. *Too bad, Jake*, he thought. *Too bad that in eight years the adventure soured so that it's ending here like this.*

McNulty and one or at most two of the original landing group left. Finish it up now before their reinforcements get here—

McNulty at any rate should be in the control room.

Harold went on along the hallway. No sounds anywhere. An open door. He approached it cautiously, looked in. A sizable office, half a dozen desks spaced out, machine stands, wall files—two of these left open. Not many minutes ago, people had been working here. Then the asteroid's alarm reached them, and like ghosts they'd vanished. At the far side of the office was another door. As he started towards it, two men stood suddenly in the doorway. Guns went off; Harold dropped behind the nearest desk. Across the room, the two had taken cover as quickly.

A real gun fight now, fast and vicious. The crewmen were Harding and Ruse, two of the *Prideful Sue's* best hands. The office furniture, in spite of its elegant appearance, was of tough solid plastic; but within a minute it was hammered half to pieces. Harold had emptied the charge in one of his guns before he got Harding. Ruse was still pouring it at him, battering the shielding desk. There was no way to reach back at him from here. Harold took a chance finally, shifting to another desk in a crouching leap, felt pain jar up from the heel of his right leg as he reached cover. Not an immediately crippling charge, though any hit of that kind was bad enough. Now, however, lying half across the desk, he had the advantage and could pour it on Ruse and did. Pinned behind his cover, Ruse kept firing furiously but ineffectively. At last he stopped firing and tried to duplicate Harold's trick, and Harold got him in the open. The second gun hissed out empty instants later.

Ruse had rolled on behind a low console. Only his legs were in sight. He seemed to be sprawled loosely on his side, and the legs weren't moving. It might be a trick, though Harold didn't think so. He knew he'd caught Ruse with a head shot; and even at minimum charge that should have been almost instantly fatal. But he stayed where he was and reached back carefully with one hand to get the gun recharger he'd taken from Connick out of his pocket. A moment's fumbling told

him it was no longer there. At some point along the line it had been jolted from the pocket and lost.

But Harding should have a recharger. Harold slid back slowly off the desk and turned towards Harding's body.

And there, coming towards him in a soft heavy rush across the littered office, clutching a thick metal spike in one human-looking hand, was McNulty.

Harold slipped back behind the desk. McNulty lunged across the desk with the spike, then lumbered around it; and as he came on, his big shape seemed to be blurring oddly from moment to moment. Then a hard deep droning noise swelled in the air, and Harold knew the Rilf's thorax was spewing out its store of toziens.

The purpose was immediately obvious. The toziens couldn't touch him, but they provided a distraction. In an instant Harold seemed enclosed in roaring thunders, and the office had turned into something seen through a shifting syrupy liquid. McNulty, in addition, hardly needed help. He was clumsy but strong and fast; his broad white face kept looming up distortedly in the tozien screen near Harold. For a nightmarish minute or two, it was all Harold could do to keep some sizable piece of office equipment between the Rilf and himself. McNulty didn't give him a chance to get near Ruse's or Harding's guns. Then finally McNulty stumbled on a broken chair and fell; and with the tozien storm whirling about him, Harold managed to wrench the spike away from the Rilf. As McNulty came back up on his feet, he moved in, the spike gripped in both hands, and rammed it deep into what, if McNulty had been human, would have been McNulty's abdomen. He had no idea where McNulty's vital organs were or what they were like, but the spike reached one of them. McNulty's mouth stretched wide. If he made any sound, it was lost in the droning uproar. His big body swayed left and right; then he went down heavily on his back and lay still, the spike's handle sticking up out of him. His eyes remained open.

Harold leaned back for an instant against the edge of a desk, gasping for breath. The toziens still boiled around, sounding like a swarm of gigantic metallic insects, but they seemed to have drawn away a little; he began to see the office more clearly. Then one of them appeared suddenly on McNulty's chest. It stayed there, quivering. Another appeared, and another. In a minute, McNulty's body was covered with them, clustering, shifting about, like flies gathering thick on carrion. Harold's skin crawled as he watched them. They were specialized cells produced by the Rilf body, pliable or steel-hard and razor-edged, depending on what they were doing. McNulty's remote ancestor had been a hunting animal, too awkward perhaps to overtake nimble prey, which had evolved a method of detaching sections of itself to carry out the kill, not unlike the hawks men had trained on old Earth to hunt on sight. McNulty still had been able to use his toziens in that manner, releasing one or more under an inhibition which impelled them to return to him after bringing down

a specific victim. Their use by the thousands in uninhibited wholesale slaughter evidently had been a more recent Riff development, perhaps not attained until they had acquired a civilization and scientific methods. Under those conditions, the toziens ranged over an area of a dozen miles, destroying whatever life they found for almost fifty hours, until their furious energy was exhausted and they died.

Harding had been carrying a recharger, and Harold replenished his guns with it before placing it in his pocket. He looked over once more at McNulty's body, motionless under its glittering blanket, and left the office by the door opposite to the one through which he had entered. Not all the toziens had returned to McNulty. An unidentifiable number still darted about, and some stayed near Harold, attracted by his motion. He knew it because they weren't inaudible now but continued to make droning or whiffing sounds as they had during McNulty's attack. Perhaps McNulty's death was having an effect on their life processes. At any rate, they no longer seemed to have any particular interest in him.

Limping a little because of the charge he'd stopped in his heel, he followed the narrow passage beyond the door to another doorway. There, at the bottom of a short flight of steps, the brightly lit deserted control room whispered and hummed. Harold hurried down the steps, looked around.

He found the space lock controls almost immediately. And they were a puzzler. The instruments indicated that the lock was open to its fullest extent. But the screen view of the landing area showed only the skiff standing there, and the screen view of the force-field sections containing the space lock showed it wasn't activated, was shut tight. He shifted the controls quickly back and forth. There was no change in the screens. He scowled at the indicators, left them at the shut and secured mark, turned to other instruments nearby, began manipulating them.

In a minute, he had the answer. He sat down at a console, heard himself make a short laughing sound. No wonder Jake Hiskey had worked so furiously to break through into the hidden passages leading into the interior of the asteroid. For every practical purpose, the control room was dead. Power was here, the gadgetry appeared to be operating. But it did and could do nothing. None of it. Nothing at all.

He drew a long slow breath, looked up at the ceiling.

"Is somebody listening?" he asked aloud. "Can you see me here?"

. . .

There was a momentary excited babble of voices, male and female. *Elisabeth?* He discovered the speaker then, ten feet away.

Elisabeth?" He asked, a sudden rawness in his throat.

"Yes, I'm here, Harold. We're all here!" Elisabeth's voice told him.

"Harold, we couldn't see you. We didn't know what was happening out--"

"The scanners, Mr. Gage." That was Alston. "The scanning circuits in that section have been shorted. We were afraid of drawing attention to you by speaking. And--"

"I understand," Harold said. "Better let me talk first because this thing isn't finished. Captain Hiskey and the men he smuggled down here from the ship are dead. So is McNulty--the Rif. But McNulty's weapon isn't dead and should stay effective for the next two days--make it two and a half, to be safe. You can't come into this section before then, and you can't go anywhere else on the asteroid where it might have spread. It can't hurt me, but any of you would be killed immediately."

"Just what is this biological weapon?" Alston's voice asked.

Harold told him briefly about the toziens, added, "You may have thrown up those screen barriers about this section fast enough to trap them here. But if you didn't, they're all over the surface of the asteroid. And if they're given an opening anywhere, they'll come pouring down into it."

"Fortunately," Alston said, "they have been trapped in the space lock section. Thanks to your prompt warning, Mr. Gage."

"What makes you sure?"

"They were registering on biological sensing devices covering that section until the scanners went off. The impressions were difficult to define but match your description. Every section of the asteroid is compartmentalized by energy screens at present, and no similar impressions have been obtained elsewhere. Nevertheless, we shall take no chances. We'll remain sealed off from the surface for the next sixty hours."

"You seem to have an override on the instruments here," Harold said.

"An automatic override," Alston acknowledged. "It cuts in when the asteroid shifts to emergency status. The possibility of a successful raid always had to be considered. So there is an interior control room."

Harold sighed. Jake Hiskey and McNulty, he thought, hadn't been alone in underestimating these people. *Well, let's get the mess cleaned up....* "You've asked the sp to do something about the *Prideful Sue*?"

"Yes," Alston said. "They'll be here within a few hours."

Tozien whirring dipped past Harold's face, moved off. "She has heavier armament than they might expect," he said. "Eight men and another Rifl on board. Our gunnery isn't the worst. But tell them to give her a chance."

"I'll do that. And I'll advise the police to take precautions."

"Yes, they should. There's one more thing then. We guided a Rifl ship here and left it outside Earthsystem. It's manned by more than half a hundred Rifls. We've been negotiating to have them take a hand for pay in Earth's miniwars. They may still try to go ahead with the deal. I think they should be turned back."

"Where is that ship now?" Alston sounded startled.

"No fixed position. But it should be moving into Earthsystem to rendezvous on your orbit. If the sp look for it, they'll find it."

Alston began to reply, but his voice blurred out for Harold. Almost as he'd stopped speaking, something had slammed into his back, below his right shoulder blade. The impact threw him out of the chair. He went on down to the floor, rolled over, twisting, on his left side, stopped, and had one of the guns in his right hand, pointed up.

Jake Hiskey's face was a smiling red mask as he leaned against the doorframe at the end of the room. There was a gun in his hand too, and he fired before Harold did. The charge shuddered into the transmitter stand behind Harold and crept quickly down. Harold pulled the trigger then, and Hiskey was flung back and fell beyond the doorframe, out of sight. Harold sucked air back into lungs that seemed tight as a clenched fist in his chest. Spent gun ... or the hit where he'd taken it should have killed him outright. Jake had been too groggy to check that detail. Not that it was going to make very much difference.

Well, Jake, he thought, perhaps that wasn't really the worst solution.

The big room swung in circles overhead as he pulled himself against the stand and sat up. Then a voice was crying his name. *Elisabeth.*

"It's all right," Harold announced thickly, idiotically. "I stopped a hit, that's all."

Questions.

"Captain Hiskey wasn't quite as dead as I believed," he explained. "He's dead enough now."

The voices grew blurred. Harold decided he was, definitely, finished. It might take a while. But the charge, spent though it had been, would start him hemorrhaging. In an hour or two heart and lungs should be dying mush. *Wicked guns, thorough guns--*

"... Immediate medical attention...."

Oh, sure.

But he was listening now to what they were telling him, and abruptly he became alarmed. "No one can come in here," he said. "I told you why. Not even in armor. Lift the screens anywhere while the toziens are alive, and they'll pour through. They're too fast to stop. You'll have to wait till you know they're dead."

Then there was, they said, another way. Between this section and the next was a small emergency personnel lock—if he could follow their instructions, if he could reach it. A suit of armor couldn't pass through it, but Harold could. And once he was inside the lock, sensing devices would establish with complete reliability whether any Rlf toziens had entered it with him.

Harold considered that. It seemed foolproof.

"All right," he said. "We'll see if it works." He began struggling up to his feet. "Just keep those screens down."

Some while later he reached the main entry to the control room, glanced down at Jake Hiskey and turned to the right, as they'd said. Toziens went with him, drawn towards the only thing that still moved in the section. There came a passage, and another one, and a door and, behind the door, a small room. Harold entered the room and looked around. "I think I'm there," he said aloud.

"Yes, you're in the right room," Alston's voice told him. "You won't see the lock until it opens, but it's in the center of the wall directly opposite the door."

"Don't open it yet," Harold said. "They're here, too."

He got across the room. As Alston had told him, there was nothing in the smooth bare wall to suggest an emergency lock behind it, but he was lined up with the center of the door on the other side, as well as he could make it out; and he should be within a few feet, at most, of the lock.

"Professor Alston," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm in front of the lock now. Wait till I give you the word. Then open it fast."

"We're ready," Alston said. "We'll know when you're inside."

Harold fished the two guns from his pockets, took them by their barrels in one hand, turned around. Supporting himself against the wall with his other hand, he lifted the guns and began waving them about. Tozien droning drew in towards the motion, thickening, zigzagging back and forth above and in front of him. Then he pitched the guns towards the far corner of the room. The droning darted off

with them. They hit the wall with a fine crash, went clattering to the floor. The air seethed noisily above them there.

"Now!" Harold said.

He saw the narrow dark opening appear in the wall two feet away, stumbled into it. After that, he seemed to go on stumbling down through soft darkness.

. . .

At first there was nothing. Then came an occasional vague awareness of time passing. A great deal of time ... years of it, centuries of it ... seemed to drift by steadily and slowly. Shadows began to appear, and withdrew again. Now and then a thought turned up. Some thoughts attracted other thoughts, clusters of them. Finally he found he had acquired a few facts. Facts had great value, he realized; they could be fitted together to form solid structures.

Carefully, painstakingly, he drew in more facts. His thoughts took to playing about them like schools of fish, shifting from one fact to another. Then there came a point at which it occurred to him that he really had a great many facts on hand now, and should start lining them up and putting them in order.

So he started doing it.

The first group was easy to assemble. In the process, he remembered suddenly having been told all this by one of the shadows:

The men left on the *Prideful Sue* had elected to put up a fight when the System Police boats arrived, and they'd put up a good one. (They should have, a stray thought added as an aside; he'd trained them.) But in the end the *Prideful Sue* was shot apart, and there'd been no survivors.

The Rilf ship, edging into Earthsystem, turned sullenly back when challenged. By the time it faded beyond the instrument range of its sp escort, it was a quarter of a light-year away from the sun, traveling steadily out.

That seemed to clear up one parcel of facts.

Other matters were more complex. He himself, for example—first just lying there, then riding about on one of the small brown cattle which had once been a wild species of Earth, finally walking again—remained something of a puzzle. There were periods when he was present so to speak, and evidently longer, completely vacant periods into which he dropped from time to time. When he came out of them, he didn't know where he'd been. He hadn't noticed it much at first; but then he began to find it disturbing.

"Well," Elisabeth said gently--she happened to be there when he started thinking seriously about this odd practice he'd developed--"the doctor said that, aside from more obvious physical damage, your nervous system got quite a bad jolt from that gun charge. But you are recovering, Harold."

So he was recovering. He decided to be satisfied with that. "How long has it been?" he asked.

"Not quite four weeks," said Elisabeth. She smiled. "You're really doing very well, Harold. What would you like me to show you today?"

"Let's look at some more of the things they're doing downstairs," Harold said.

Professor Derek Alston's asteroid also remained something of an enigma. In Mars Underground, and in the sp Academy's navigation school, the private asteroids had been regarded much as they were on Earthplanet, as individually owned pleasure resorts of the very rich which maintained no more contact with the rest of humanity than was necessary. Evidently they preferred to have that reputation. Elisabeth had told him it wasn't until she'd been a Solar U student for a few years that she'd learned gradually that the asteroids performed some of the functions of monasteries and castles in Earth's Middle Ages, built to preserve life, knowledge, and culture through the turbulence of wars and other disasters. They were storehouses of what had become, or was becoming, now lost on Earth, and their defenses made them very secure citadels. The plants and animals of the surface levels were living museums. Below the surface was a great deal more than that. In many respects they acted as individual extensions of Solar U, though they remained independent of it.

All of which seemed true, from what he had seen so far. But the thought came occasionally that it still mightn't be the complete picture. There were the projects, for one thing. This miniature planet, for all that it was an insignificant speck of cosmic debris, had, on the human scale, enormous quantities of cubic space. Very little of the space was in practical use, and that was used in an oddly diffused manner. There were several central areas which in their arrangement might have been part of a residential section of Mars Underground. Having lived mainly on an interstellar ship for the past eight years, Harold found himself reflecting on the fact that if the asteroid's population had been around a hundred times its apparent size, it would not have been unduly crowded. Elsewhere were the storerooms; and here Elisabeth loved to browse, and Harold browsed with her, though treasures of art and literature and the like were of less interest to him. Beautiful things perhaps, but dead.

. . .

And then the projects-- Step into a capsule, a raindrop-shaped shell,

guide through a system of curving tunnels, checking here and there to be fed through automatic locks; and you came to a project. Two or three or at most four people would be conducting it; they already knew who you were, but you were introduced, and they showed you politely around. Elisabeth's interest in what they had to show was moderate. Harold's kept growing.

"You're running some rather dangerous experiments here," he remarked eventually to Derek Alston. This was on another day. There'd been only a scattered few of those blank periods lately.

Derek shook his head. "I don't run them," he said. "They're Solar U and sp projects. The asteroid merely provides facilities."

"Why do you let them set themselves up here?"

Derek Alston shrugged. "They have to be set up somewhere. If there should be some disastrous miscalculation, our defensive system will contain the damage and reduce the probable loss in human lives."

And the asteroid had, to be sure, a remarkable defensive system. For any ordinary purpose it seemed almost excessive. Harold had studied it and wondered again.

"In Eleven," he said, "they're working around with something on the order of a solar cannon. If they slip up on that one, you might find your defensive system strained."

Derek looked over at him.

"I believe you weren't supposed to know the purpose of that device," he said idly.

"They were a little misleading about that, as a matter of fact," said Harold. "But I came across something similar in the outsystems once."

"Yes, I imagine you've learned a great deal more there than they ever taught in navigation school." Derek scratched his head and looked owlsh. "If you were to make a guess, what would you say was the real purpose of maintaining such projects on our asteroid? After all, I have to admit that the System Police and Solar U are capable of providing equally suitable protective settings for them."

"The impression I've had," Harold told him, "is that they're being kept a secret from somebody. They're not the sort of thing likely to be associated with a private asteroid."

"No, not at all. Your guess is a good one. There are men, and there is mankind. Not quite the same thing. Mankind lost a major round on Earthplanet in this century and exists there only in fragments. And though men go to the outsystems, mankind hasn't reached them yet."

"You think it's here?"

"Here in Solar U, in the System Police, in major centers like Mars Underground. And on the private asteroids. Various shapes of the same thing. Yes, mankind is here, what's left of it at the moment. It has regrouped in Earthsystem and is building up."

Harold considered that. "Why make it a conspiracy?" he asked then. "Why not be open about it?"

"Because it's dangerous to frighten men. Earthplanet regards Earthsystem as an irritation. But it looks at our lack of obvious organization and purpose, our relatively small number, and it doesn't take alarm. It knows it would take disproportionate effort, tremendous unified effort, to wipe us out, and we don't seem worth it. So Earth's men continue with their grinding struggles and maneuverings which eventually are to give somebody control of the planet. By that time Earthsystem's mankind should not be very much concerned about Earthplanet's intentions towards it.

"The projects you've seen are minor ones. We move farther ahead of them every year, and our population grows steadily. Even now I doubt that the planet's full resources would be sufficient to interfere seriously with that process. But for the present we must conceal the strength we have and the strength we are obtaining. We want no trouble with Earth. Men will have their way there for a time, and then, whatever their designs, mankind will begin to evolve from them again, as it always does. It is a hardy thing. We can wait...."

. . .

And that, Harold decided, had been upper echelon information, given him by one who might be among Earthsystem's present leaders. Elisabeth and Sally Alston had a general understanding of the situation but did not seem to be aware of the underlying purpose. Professor Alston evidently had made him an offer.

He thought about it, and presently a feeling began to grow in him, something like loss, something like loneliness. Elisabeth appeared to sense it and was disturbed.

Then another day. A gun was in his hand again, and in his other hand were the last three of a dozen little crystal globes he'd picked up in one of the machine shops. He swung them up, and they went flying away along a massive wall of asteroid rock. As they began to drop again, the gun snaked out and, in turn, each of the globes sparkled brightly and vanished.

He'd been aware of Derek Alston coming up from behind him before he fired; and now he pocketed the gun and turned.

"Very pretty shooting, friend!" Derek remarked. "I never was able to develop much skill with a handgun myself, but I enjoy watching an expert."

Harold shrugged. "I had the time, and the motivation, to put in a great deal of practice."

"No doubt." Derek held up a sheaf of papers. "Your final medical and psychological reports! It appears you've come all the way back. Care to look them over?"

Harold shook his head. "No. I've known for a couple of days that I'd come all the way back." He patted the pocket which held the gun. "This was a test."

They regarded each other a moment. And now, Harold wondered, how was he going to say it? The Alstons had been more than generous hosts, and Derek took pride in what Earthsystem was accomplishing—with very good reason.

But he'd moved for eight years among the stars. And in spite of all the plans that had gone sour, and the ugliness which tarnished and finally destroyed the *Prideful Sue*, he'd found there what he'd been looking for. Earthsystem seemed dwindled and small. He couldn't possibly come back to it.

Make it brief, he thought.

"I'm not sure what I'll do next," he told Derek Alston. "But I'm shipping transsolar again."

"Well, I should hope so!" said Derek promptly.

"I was wondering whether you'd understand ... Elisabeth in particular."

"Of course she understands! I do—we all do!" Derek smiled. "But before you start talking of leaving, there's one more project I must show you. It's one you should appreciate...."

They stepped, a minute later, out of a capsule deep in the bowels of the asteroid, and went along a passage with steel bulkheads. A massive lock opened at their approach, and lights came on.

"Come on in and look around," Derek said. "This is our third control room. Not too many people know we have it."

Harold looked around the shining place. First incredulously, then with something like growing awe. He glanced at Derek Alston. "Mind if I check these?" he asked.

"Not at all. Go ahead."

Once, some two years before, he'd been in the control room of Earthplanet's biggest, newest, and proudest outsystem transport. What he'd seen then was dwarfed, made trifling and clumsy, by what was here. His skin shivered with a lover's delight. "You have power to go with it?" he asked presently.

"We have the power."

"Where's the asteroid going on interstellar drives?"

"I told you mankind hadn't got to the outsystems yet," Derek said.

"But it's ready to move there. We've been preparing for it. The outsystems won't know for a while that we're around—not till we're ready to let them know it."

"This asteroid is moving to the outsystems?"

"Not this one. Not for some years. We still have functions to perform here. But a few others—the first will be ready to start within the next three months. They can use an experienced transsolar navigator. They think they can also use a fighting captain with an outsystem background. If you're interested, I'll take you over to one of them this afternoon."

Harold drew in a long, deep breath.

"I'm interested," he said.