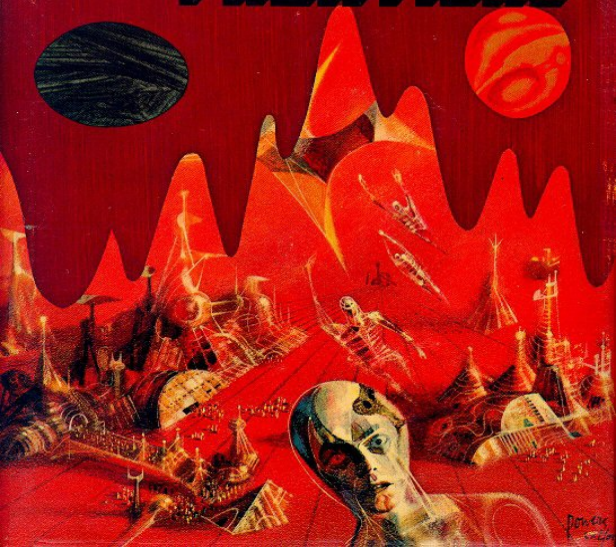


a new science fiction novel by

**JAMES H. SCHMITZ**

author of *The Witches of Karres*

# THE ETERNAL FRONTIERS

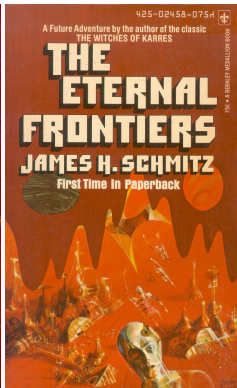
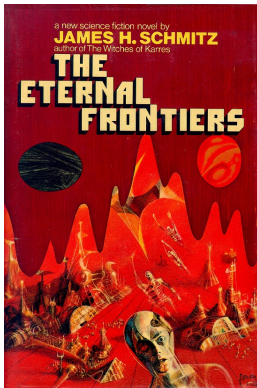


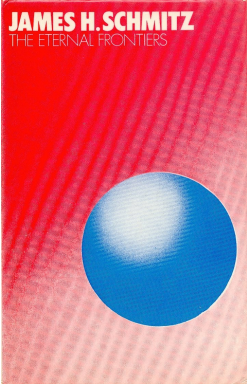


# *The Eternal Frontiers*

**James Schmitz**

Published 1973 by G. P. Putnam's Sons (hardcover) and Berkley (paperback). Reprinted by Sidgwick & Jackson 1974, and also 1976 in omnibus format as *Science Fiction Special 18* (along with Keith Laumer's *The House in November* and Brian N. Ball's *Planet Probability*). This version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





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The two spaceskiffs appeared out of thick cloud cover behind them, not much more than five miles away. Ilken spotted them in the car screens an instant before Crowell did, said quickly, "Looks like we're being jumped!"

For a moment, watching the skiffs hurtling toward them, Crowell didn't believe it was an attack, though Ragnor training took over as automatically with him as it did with Ilken. She was slipping into the shielded seat of the gun in the center of the aircar as he turned the car's nose down, sent it racing toward the patchy dark green of the Kulkoor forest below. His finger pressed a stud and his seat's shield closed about him. "In place!" her voice said. Another stud jammed down. The canopy unfolded abruptly above, snapped down into the walls.

Ready for action.

The skiffs had halved the distance between them by then, and Crowell saw they weren't aircars as he'd assumed at first glance. They were cutting speed sharply--space vehicles weren't normally designed for treetop level maneuverings, and forest growth swayed barely twenty feet below as he brought the car out of its dive. But he couldn't outrun them. It was a question of what kind of stuff they carried. There was no longer any question about their intentions.

The car's guns *brrumpped* out the short heavy stuttering of a triple defensive charge. Yellow shimmering abruptly veiled the rear screen. Lights blazed through the shimmer and ragged roars of sound shook

the car. Spray torps. Neatly blocked.

Then a final flare of light to the left, too far off target to be in line with the filtering fields--and, barely audible, the momentary hard hiss of spray against plastic and metal. Crowell looked back quickly at Ilken. She grinned reassuringly through the gun shield. "Lousy shot!" her voice commented.

That, however, was precisely what had made it dangerous. Crowell was checking the controls, slowing the car, turning it into a wide circle. No immediate evidence of significant damage. They'd been at the limit of the torp's effective range. He said, "They may get the idea and start bracketing us. Where are they now?"

"Looping overhead. Be back in thirty seconds."

"Can you take them?"

"If they come in a bit closer this pass. You playing cripple?"

"Yes. Let's finish it before they change tactics."

Crowell heeled the car half over. "I'm watching the trees, not them. Give me directions."

"More to the left," Ilken's voice told him. "They're coming. Man, they *are* fast! Still more to the left--steady! Just drift.... That's it!"

The gun erupted on the last word.

"Got them!" She half sang it.

Crowell heard explosion, righted the car and whipped it up above the wall of waving greenery toward which it had been sliding. He looked around. One skiff was a ball of boiling smoke. The other--Ilken swore

furiously. "Only singed him!" The gun swiveled after the plunging vehicle.

"Hold it!"

"Why?"

"It's out of action. The pilot may still--there he goes!"

A bulky object, man-shaped, dwarfed by distance, had been ejected by the crippled skiff, began its own drift to earth as the skiff smashed slanting into the forest. The figure turned over, dropped more quickly toward the trees.

"He's alive!" Ilken's voice said thinly.

"I want him alive, you bloodthirsty Mailliard!" The aircar was hurtling toward the descending figure. "We have to find out who they are."

"You'll find out--if you catch him! He's going to make it down." Her voice was chilled with self-disgust.

The figure did make it down into the trees before they reached it. But, Crowell thought, that was strictly a temporary escape. The trees formed a detached small wood, a ragged oval of dense growth surrounded by open rocky ground. The skiff pilot was somewhere within the growth. Crowell brought the car to a halt above the center of the wood, inquired, "Didn't bring along a communicator, did you?"

"No." There was abrupt alertness in Ilken's voice. "Something wrong with the car comm?"

"Dead. Got hit evidently. I've been trying to raise the Base."

She said nothing. It could cause new problems. There was a



spaceship around, which had sent the skiffs down to do a job. The ship might be carrying other skiffs, and if the people aboard realized the first attempt had failed, the other skiffs might soon appear. But the probability was that the ship would leave quickly and quietly. For all its crew knew, Crowell already was in communication with the Base, had reported the attack, commandeered reinforcements, alerted the Star Union sentinel ship. If the raider was above atmosphere, the sentinel ship should have it in its instruments--

"Let's get our man!" he said. He unsnapped the energy carbine beside the driver's seat, stood up. "Set me down on the other side of the trees, then get back up here...." He broke off. "You're hurt! Why didn't you--"

"Been hurt worse." Ilken had slipped out from behind the gun shield. Red wetness. She'd slit the left leg of her bush outfit from hip to knee, slapped two broad strips of sealing plastic to the side of her thigh.

"How bad is it?" He spoke almost brusquely, knowing she'd gone Mailliard on him. Any indication of anxiety here would be bad form. As it was, the short black brows above her pale eyes lifted slightly at the question. But she said, "Just my legs." She touched the plastic. "That's the two worst cuts. There's nothing that can't wait."

A ring of whiteness showed about her mouth; aside from that, her expression revealed only a trace of impatience. Crowell had never fully understood the Mailliard ability to push pain and shock to the edges of awareness as long as circumstances required it. But he did feel somewhat reassured. The skiff pilot almost certainly was a Star Union swimmer--picking him up, getting indisputable evidence that this had been a swimmer plot could be vitally important. It shouldn't take many minutes to do it. He asked, "Can you operate?"

"Yes." She proved it by walking past him, settling herself in the

driver's seat. Her motions gave no evidence of discomfort. "That man's in a support suit, isn't he?" she said.

"That's what it looked like."

"He's probably armed."

"Handgun at most. They wouldn't have expected to have to get out of their skiffs."

"You want to drive him out of the trees?"

"Or get him to surrender," Crowell said. "If he bolts, try to pin him down in the open with the car. Don't kill him unless it looks like he's going to make it into one of the big forest patches."

Ilken nodded. "All right. You think he's a swimmer?"

"I'm almost sure he is."

"Supposing he's a Galestral? We're in their area. Might be something here they don't want us to stumble across."

"There just might be," Crowell agreed. "But then they wouldn't try to hit us while we are in their area. It would turn suspicion directly on them--which is what the swimmers would like."

"Yes, you're right."

Ilken set the car in motion. They circled the growth once, not far above the treetops. If the pilot sighted them, it should discourage him from attempting to cross open ground. Then the car dipped quickly to the edge of the wood. Crowell swung down, carbine in hand, and Ilken took the car up again to assume a watch position.

Crowell slipped in among the trees. He was reasonably certain that what they'd seen ejected from the skiff was an undamaged standard support suit. If so, the man inside was subject to no gravity pull. The suit was a one-man vehicle, fairly maneuverable. It could move at a respectable speed in the open, but in heavy growth like this its propulsion devices were almost useless. The pilot might be physically unharmed, but if he was a swimmer, his emotional condition should be less satisfactory. The odds were it was the first time he'd found himself on a planet without a gravity-shielded dome about him, at the bottom of a moving ocean of atmosphere, hiding in a tangle of restlessly stirring alien life. The suit sensors provided him with sight and sound, but what they had to report was unfamiliar. And he must expect that this shifting, uneasy environment concealed a hunter or hunters. He shouldn't feel much confidence in his position. It might very well be possible to get him to surrender.

Some half a dozen leggy quadrupeds, slate-gray in color, stepped out of dense undergrowth into Crowell's path and stood for a startled moment, staring at him. They might already have been alarmed by the noise and light flashes of the nearby air battle--and they could serve a purpose here! Crowell sprang suddenly forward, throwing up his arms. The herd wheeled about with squeals of fright and pounded off through the brush.

Crowell stood still again, wondering what the skiff pilot had made of the abrupt commotion. Then he stepped back behind a tree trunk.

The support suit was coming into view. Any doubts he might have had about the identity of the attackers would have been discarded now. This was how a suited null-g swimmer moved on a planet's surface in places where his propulsion devices weren't usable. The legs tiptoed along through the brush, bulky torso swaying this way and that. The man inside wasn't walking but pushing himself forward and lifting briefly into the air with each step. His free hand reached

ahead, grasping at whatever was available to help pull the body along. The other hand wasn't free because it held a gun.

The big rounded head section contained no viewplate, but the swimmer could keep simultaneous watch on the area about and above him through a set of screens inside. This was as close as Crowell was likely to get to his quarry without being seen. He leveled the carbine, stepped out from behind the tree, said sharply, "Drop the gun! Stay where you are!"

The swimmer twisted about--not at all awkwardly or uncertainly now, but in a swift powerful motion that brought the suit's legs off the ground, swung him around to point head on, lying flat in the air, toward Crowell. The handgun was firing as he moved, ejecting a thirty-foot needle of blue-white radiance which swept in toward Crowell from the right, scything through the growth. No need for careful aim from the swimmer's point of view... as the knife of fire flashed through the space where Crowell stood, Crowell would die.

It was standard practice with that type of weapon, simple and fast. Against a gun already aimed, it wasn't fast enough. Crowell squeezed the carbine's trigger briefly. The support suit jerked backward and the handgun's beam winked out. The suit began to turn, was caught by the undergrowth and slid slowly down through it to the ground.

Crowell came walking forward, eyes on the suit, chewing his lip. He'd sighted at the man's shoulder, but he'd seen the suit turn sideways as he fired. Only slightly, but too far! The bolt had ripped on into the torso. The pilot almost certainly was dead.

He picked up the handgun and pocketed it, then leaned the carbine against a shrub, and unfastened the head section of the support suit. As he turned the section back, the pilot's head sagged to the side.

The eyes were half closed. Crowell found no trace of throat pulse. He looked at the angle at which the beam had seared into the suit and the body within, shook his head and sealed the suit again. He moved back out of the trees the way he had come, towing the nearly weightless suit behind him.

The car settled to the ground. Ilken's tanned face looked out at him. "He's dead?"

"Quite dead. Couldn't help it. We'll take the body back to Base."

"Star Union type suit," she remarked, looking at it. "A swimmer?"

"Definitely. For the record, I want the null-g characteristics established by the medical department."

Ilken said, "There's an aircar upstairs watching us."

Startled, Crowell glanced up, saw only cloudy sky. "Not another of their skiffs?"

"Aircar. I had it in the screen. Not one from the Base, so it should be the Galestrals'." She pointed suddenly. "Up there!"

Crowell gazed in the indicated direction, saw a pale speck drift out from among cloud veils. They'd been less than fifty miles from the Galestral survey team's ship position when the attack began. "I'll try to wave them down," he said.

"Think you can trust them?"

He shrugged. "About as much as we can trust anyone on Kulkoor at present. We've no quarrel with the Galestral Company, so far. If I can use their communicator to contact the Base, it'll save us a good deal of time."

He lifted the support suit and its contents into the back section of the car, moved thirty steps away, sealed his coat pockets, took off the coat and began swinging it back and forth through the air. Perhaps a minute passed. The car above was moving very slowly but seemed to be continuing on its course. "What makes you think they're watching us?" Crowell asked.

"They're circling. What else would they be looking at?" Ilken added, "They're starting down now--they've seen you!"

Crowell continued to wave the coat until it became obvious that the aircar was, in fact, descending toward them. Then he slipped the coat on, fastened it. "They may have caught the shooting from a distance," he said.

"Probably did," Ilken agreed.

He looked over at her. "Legs bothering you?"

"Not as much as they will be."

"We want to get attention for them as soon as we can."

Ilken, eyes on the approaching aircar, remarked, "Legs might have become a problem if we'd had to walk back to Base--or even the fifty miles to the Galestral ship. But we'd probably have made it, either way."

"We'd--what are you talking about?"

She nodded at the console. "Power section took a hit. Gauge shows two minutes flight left--and it's dropping."

Crowell swore. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"No sense worrying you with it until we found out whether the Galestrals would come down for us. You know, I'm looking forward to this! Always did want to meet a Galestral...."

## 2

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Crowell had seen a Cencom tape identifying the three people in the aircar which presently settled to the ground a dozen yards from him. They were the full complement of the Galestral heavy metals survey team on Kulkoor, and--supposedly, at least--three fourths of the entire current Galestral representation on the planet. Their names were Grant Gage, Ned Brock, Jill Hastings. They might range in age between Ilken and himself. When they stepped out of the car, each had one of the light Suesvant rifles of Galestral slung from the shoulder.

Crowell explained the situation briefly. They didn't seem surprised; no doubt they were well briefed on the political rivalries and tensions between the swimmer and walker factions of the Star Union. Grant Gage said they'd picked up energy bursts on a survey instrument from thirty-five miles away and come to investigate. They'd seen nothing of the aerial fight and hadn't realized Crowell was in trouble until they saw him waving at them in the ground screen.

Jill Hastings broke in. "You say Lieutenant Tegeler was hurt by torp spray...."

"Yes," Crowell said. He'd told Ilken to wait in the car. "She feels the

damage isn't too significant, but I want to get our medical department here immediately to make sure."

"You're over two hours from your Base," Jill pointed out. "We can have her on our ship in ten minutes and start doing something about the spray."

Crowell studied her. Slender, blond, intelligent face, reflective blue eyes. Looking very competent in her bush outfit. However, torp spray injuries were messy things to handle--

Grant Gage said, "Jill's our surgeon, and a good one, Captain Witter. The ship's equipped for emergencies of that kind."

Crowell nodded. "I appreciate the offer! Let's see what Lieutenant Tegeler thinks."

Ilken thought it was a fine idea. She smiled at Jill. "Stuff's beginning to be something of a nuisance."

They completed arrangements quickly. Crowell used the Galestral car's communicator to contact the Base. Dr. Bates would come out at once. A technical crew was to collect all available evidence of the skiff attack, and guncars were to accompany the group in case of attempted interference.

Captain Bymer, of the sentinel ship, could not be reached immediately by the Base comm office. Crowell thought he might be in pursuit of the raider, said, "Get me in contact with him as soon as you can."

Guy Hansen next--

Hansen's voice said dryly from the communicator, "We've had some trouble here, too, Witter. The aerial surveillance system is



inoperative."

"Inoperative in what way?"

"I haven't been able to determine either the cause or the extent of the damage as yet. But in view of your experience, sabotage seems a definite possibility."

"When did it happen?"

"About an hour ago."

That did make sabotage a definite possibility. Hansen was still in the process of establishing an aerial surveillance pattern about Kulkoor; at present, there would have been very little chance that the skiff attack on Crowell's car could be recorded by one of the system's units. But the people behind the attack wouldn't know that.

Crowell spoke last with Herrick, his security deputy. "We're not slapping secrecy on this," he said, "because I want you to watch for reactions. Now they've tried to hit me and missed, somebody might like to do away with evidence. The Public Servant Betheny and her two swimmer attendants are confined to her quarters. Take any steps necessary to make sure they stay there, regardless of what Betheny or others have to say about it. You have the authority under Cencom Seal."

"Yes, sir!" said Herrick cheerfully. "The Public Servant is to be allowed the use of a communicator?"

"Definitely. Let her get her sympathizers lined up. It will make it easier to handle them by the time I get back to Base. If there's any actual trouble before then, take care of it on the spot. You're my personal representative as of now."

Crowell switched off the communicator, climbed out of the car. The survey team, standing outside with Ilken, had been listening with unconcealed interest.

"Many thanks," he said to Grant Gage. "That's started things rolling. Now if you'd care to get the patient to your ship--"

Gage asked, "You're not coming with us?"

"No," Crowell said. "I'll be sitting at the gun in our car until the Base group gets here. I'm not entirely sure we're finished here with whoever sent down those skiffs."

Gage nodded. "I believe I'll stay with you, Captain Witter." He smiled briefly. "The Galestral Company has an obvious interest in seeing that your evidence remains intact. Ned can take Lieutenant Tegeler and Jill to the ship and come back with the car."

. . .

Ilken Tegeler lay stretched out, facedown, on a white surgical shelf in a small brightly lit cabin of the Galestral ship. Her clothing, slashed here and there by spent spray where it wasn't blood-soaked, was being cleaned and repaired elsewhere on the ship, and Jill Hastings was at work getting the torp spray particles back out of her. The nozzle of a shiny container behind the shelf adhered to the pit of Ilken's left elbow. What she got from it was a feeling of warmth spreading in a slow flow through her arm and on through her body. Actually, it was feeding something into her to act as a substitute for the blood she was losing. She'd lost plenty already, and was likely to

lose a good deal more before Jill was done. The torp needles had struck deep here and there. Most of them were tiny, not easy to locate, and not at all easy to remove.

But she felt perfectly comfortable. More than comfortable. They had a marvelous sort of anesthetic, which couldn't really be called an anesthetic, since there was no insensitivity or numbness. What she felt, as Jill's instruments searched out the torp fragments, dug and sucked delicately at them, was a continuing series of soothing pleasure pulses. She decided her brain was recording pain, probably rather severe pain, but was being tricked into identifying it as something else.

"People could learn to *like* being cut to pieces this way!" she remarked presently.

"As a matter of fact," Jill said, "people have learned to like it. The pleasure effect can be stepped up considerably. You have to be careful with the stuff."

Ilken frowned. "Mighty foolish people!"

"Yes. Very foolish."

"That was on Galestral?"

"Yes. I don't believe the drug's in use anywhere else."

Ilken was silent a moment. "Number of things I'd like to know," she said then. "Distract you to talk?"

"Not at all. But try not to move."

Ilken said, "There're legends about you Galestrals on backwoods planets like Ragnor. The way I used to hear it told when I was a child,

all Galestrals stood ten feet tall--and there *weren't* any stupid ones."

Jill chuckled gently. "Too bad it's not true! I've known remarkably stupid Galestrals. And physically we average smaller than the Star Union's walker citizens--not to mention advanced swimmer types."

"It's because Galestral's near g and a half that you've cut down on size?"

"Uh-huh. Adaptation. The process seems to have leveled off in the past few generations."

"Noticed the way you people move at around norm-g here," Ilken remarked. "Real light and easy, like you didn't know how to stumble! You've been to the space cities?"

"No," Jill said. "I've worked with the Company's exploration and survey teams since I finished training. I've never been in Star Union territory."

"That rifle you carry--it's a Suesvant?"

"Yes."

"Same model they use against the superbeasts?"

"The very same." Jill's voice smiled. "Does it seem too light for that?"

"Just by looking at it, I'd have said so. More like something for small game, up to people. I've heard the Suesvants have an awful punch."

"They do, when that's what you need. But they can be used on small game, too, without tearing it up. It depends on the type of shell you select."

"Hm! Any secrets about the construction?"

Jill said there wasn't really--rifles of the general Suesvant type had been manufactured off and on in the Star Union. But they'd never become popular except on Galestral, where personal weapons of exceptional effectiveness had been a survival requirement until fairly recent times. If they were any good, they were complicated precision instruments, and very expensive. "The main point, though, is the amount of practice it takes to learn how to handle a Suesvant so that in an emergency you make the right moves automatically," she said. "It would be quite easy to make the wrong move with a Suesvant when there's no time to think about it."

"Because of the different kinds of shells?"

"Mostly. I limit myself to five standard types as a rule. But there are over a hundred to choose from for specific purposes."

"You've been in the... what do they call those places on Galestral?"

"The wildlands? Yes. I spent four months in them near the end of my training period. A sort of graduation test."

"And you've stopped superbeasts with the Suesvant?"

"A few. Most of them won't go up against humans anymore. But you can't ever be sure in their territories. Some will be watching you and pretending they aren't, while they lay traps and wait for you to get careless. The Company feels that in four months you'll be tested enough to qualify for the Space Exploration Corps. So I graduated.... My turn now--when did you leave Ragnor?"

"Eh? Oh, a little more than half a year ago," Ilken said. "Captain Witter got a discharge from the Rangers, and I got one with him. We went to Halcolm. He was born there. First space city I'd seen--first

*anything* I'd seen at that time except Ragnor."

"What did you think of it?"

"Halcolm was interesting, all right, but I wouldn't want to stay there much longer than we did. It's a mixed city, and the swimmers have been getting control of it. There's a big null-g section, and most of the rest of the city is quarter-g. You get warned when you come to a norm-g area, so nobody wanders in by accident and hurts himself! Most of Halcolm's walkers couldn't stand on their feet under norm-g. They get exercised in a box during their sleep periods, so they'll stay healthy."

"I've heard about that. The sleepex."

"Yes. And maybe they are healthy," Ilken said, "though they looked pretty flabby to me. But they mostly like quarter-g because it seems like less work, and they don't mind eating medicated food to make up for it because they can't taste the medication. The swimmers, anyway, exercise. I was taught null-g gymnastics while I was there. *That is great!*"

"Who taught you?"

"Captain Witter. He was born a swimmer."

Jill said, "He doesn't give one that impression."

"No. He got into a g-training program when he was eleven, to show he could be a norm-g walker if he felt like it. Still the walker type basically, so he made it, and became a walker then finally, politically. But all his relatives are swimmers, some of them pretty high up in the Swimmer League. I guess they think Captain Witter's a little odd, though he gets along with them all right."

"What do you think of the swimmers generally?"

"When they're not shooting at me?" Ilken asked dryly. "Well—I don't mind them being what they are. It's their business. But I wouldn't like to see them get the upper hand in the Star Union. They'd want to turn everybody into swimmers, and if you didn't want to be one, there aren't many places to go that seem worth going to."

"Two ways of life, with diverging technologies and diverging types of adaptive body chemistry," Jill's voice said thoughtfully. "Eventually, there should be two species. I've been told we already have them. Maintaining mixed populations in the space cities must be getting increasingly awkward for both sides. I can see why the swimmers want to settle it their way."

"So can I," Ilken said. "But I don't want that to be my way. They push it at you like it's a religion. We'd visit some of Captain Witter's people or swimmer friends and they'd hear I was a Mailliard of Ragnor, and pretty soon then one or the other would be explaining to me how Man started out as the primitive Earth walker and became spaceman who brought the Star Union into existence and was evolving now as the swimmer into *homo universalis*, who was the highest form of life ever known and would still go on evolving.

"But a planet walker who insisted on remaining a walker obviously couldn't evolve into anything. His or her descendants would still simply be walker primitives. I couldn't even get angry about it because they really were trying to make me see the light and welcome me into the fold. Freed of the ancestral gravitational bonds, is how they liked to put it. Captain Witter never argued with them, so I didn't either. I'd just smile nicely. Guess they decided I must be sort of dense!"

Jill laughed.

"But I couldn't stand living even as a walker in one of the norm-g cities," Ilken said. "Big as they are and even when you can look out through the walls and see the stars, they're still spaceships, and you're inside. From what I've heard of Galestral, you wouldn't think Ragnor was much of a world to brag about, but we were *outside* there, with the whole galaxy around us. Swimmers don't know what the feeling is like, being a planet walker! They're always inside *something*. Was that why the people who settled Galestral left the Star Union—to get away from the space cities?"

"In part," Jill's voice told her. "They seem to have had something like a religious drive, too, but it was to be back on the surface of a terroid world. And in part they wanted to be independent of Cencom and Star Union politics—not just away from the swimmers."

"Well, they made it. No one else around here now is really independent of Cencom."

"No, it seems nobody is."

There was a pause in the talk for some minutes after that. Jill's instruments remained busy. Ilken, ignoring them--ignoring also the feelings of pleasure they produced, which now seemed somewhat indecent--was thinking. She was inclined to like this helpful and friendly-seeming Galestral woman; but the Galestrals might be enemies. Not her enemies directly, but enemies of the Star Union. Therefore, here on Kulkoor, of Crowell Witter. Therefore again, her own.

No harm in fishing a little farther....

Ilken said, "Cencom records say it was you and Grant Gage who discovered that ghost mining camp in the mountains everybody's



puzzled about."

"That's right. We did find it."

"Been back there lately?"

"No, not for some while. Why?"

"It's where we were headed when the swimmer skiffs jumped us. Captain Witter thought we might run across your man Farquhar there."

Silence for a moment. Then Jill's voice said, "It might be as good a place as any to look for Farquhar. But I doubt he'll be found if he doesn't choose to be found. He doesn't tell even us where he goes or what he's doing."

"Thought you three were supposed to be helping him look for... whatever it is he's looking for."

"That's what we thought," Jill said dryly. "Our instructions say we're his back-up team. If he asks for any kind of assistance in solving the so-called Kulkoor Problem, we're to give it to him. Technically, we're under his orders in that respect. So far, he hasn't asked for assistance. In fact, he's implied that at best we'd be in his way. I've seen him twice since he reached Kulkoor. He's conducting the investigation for the Company strictly on his own."

"That's all right with the Company?"

"Evidently. Farquhar's supposed to be the best biota analyst alive--and he does have a remarkable record in the Exploration Corps."

"Record for doing what?"

"For noticing things nobody else happened to notice. He's got his own mobile laboratory, his own supply of message drones, reports directly to the Galestral Company. He lets us know periodically that he's still alive. Otherwise, he ignores us as much as he can. Apparently he's working on a theory he doesn't want to discuss."

"Do you three have a theory?" Ilken asked.

"About why there was a mysteriously abandoned mining camp on Kulkoor a year before legitimate mining operations were to begin?"

"Yes."

"Well," Jill said, "it's not hard to guess why the miners came. Presumably a wildcat outfit from some terroid settlement heard of the Kulkoor find and was trying to make off with a fortune in ore while they had the opportunity. The question is how and why the men disappeared. We've done some theorizing about that like everyone else. There's always the possibility, of course, that the camp is a fake."

"Set up so someone would find it?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Conceivably," Jill's voice said amiably, "to justify measures the Star Union would like to take on Kulkoor."

"And Cencom," said Ilken, "seems to think the Galestral Company might have set up the camp. For the same general reason."

"Well, if Cencom isn't responsible, it could suspect that. It's logical."

"Um! What's another of your theories?"

"We haven't come up with anything that looks good. But there's an animal here that could make it seem a man had disappeared without trace. It's a flying animal."

"We saw some big flying things along the coast on the way out from the Base," Ilken said.

"That type seems mainly a carrion eater. But there's an inland species, probably related, that's strictly a hunter, and a powerful one. We've seen it a number of times in the mountain forests around the camp area. If a flock of those creatures had staged a surprise raid on the camp, they'd be physically capable of cleaning it out in a matter of moments. But it would take a level of intelligence Kulkoor's fauna doesn't appear to have reached. The fliers hunt individually and in pairs, not in flocks."

"Still doesn't sound like the worst theory to me," Ilken observed drowsily. "You mentioned it to Farquhar?"

"We dictated it to the communicator in his air cruiser. There was no sign he was listening, but it was recorded. We picked up his recorded reply a few days later. He thanked us for the suggestion--and said he felt we made an excellent heavy metals survey team."

Ilken said, "Guess I see now why he hasn't answered either to the comm calls Captain Witter's been sending him since we landed here four days ago. Odd thing about your other theory, you know! Swimmer League could have had the mining camp set up to push Cencom in their direction--null-g domes for the Kulkoor operations. Or Cencom could have done it. Captain Witter and I wouldn't have to know about that."

"No, you wouldn't."

Ilken yawned, slowly and luxuriously. "On the other hand," she said, "Galestral people could have set it up, and you three wouldn't have to know it.... Farquhar might."

Jill's voice said something that faded out curiously. Ilken then had a prolonged sense of drifting gently away from everything here without being either inclined or able to do anything about it.

### 3

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Some time later--Ilken couldn't have said whether it was a long time or a short one--she became aware again of being in the Galestral ship's bright little sick bay, having torp spray pleasurably excised from her, while a shiny container behind the surgical shelf gently pumped its blood substitute into her arm. There was something else going on. Jill was asking questions, and she was replying to them.

Ilken felt a touch of grim amusement. The new drug affecting her now was in keeping with her other experiences here--beautifully efficient! She wanted to answer the questions; she enjoyed answering them; and she wasn't even able to remember what it could be like to feel opposed to answering them.

But it didn't make any difference. Crowell might have had secrets to spill under such circumstances; she didn't have any. There was nothing of real significance the Galestrals could learn through her... and actually Jill didn't seem to be digging for secrets, at least not at

the moment. She was asking questions about the Ragnor Campaign. In particular, about Crowell's and Ilken's part in the final stages of it.

"Well, when Captain Witter went to Cencom and sold them on his plan," Ilken heard herself saying, "we'd been long beaten but didn't know it. There were only around forty-two thousand Mailliards left on Ragnor. The year we wiped out the Star Union's swimmer dome colony, there'd been easily five times that many. We didn't know the losses we'd taken. You didn't use a communicator much in those years because the Rangers had learned to zero in on them fast. So we thought there were a lot more of the groups still around but out of contact. At that stage, the Rangers could have finished us off in another six months if they'd pushed it. But they were holding back."

"Why?"

"Politics. After the Ragnor Campaign began, Cencom was able to build up its walker ground forces to over ten times what it'd had until then. We'd showed that swimmer troops weren't good at taking or holding planet territory, and as long as Mailliards were fighting on Ragnor, Cencom had a fine official reason to keep adding to its walker strength. We weren't to be wiped out too quickly. Of course, we didn't know that either. We could count, and what we saw was that it still usually cost the Star Union two to three dead Rangers to chalk up one dead Mailliard. We figured we weren't doing badly."

"How did Captain Witter change it?"

"He'd got the facts on Ragnor, and he didn't mind talking about them. He had proof. It wasn't the kind of story Cencom liked to have spread around the Star Union. And if he could get the Mailliards to become Star Union citizens, Cencom would have a new ready-made ground strike force of planet walkers born and bred at norm-g plus. Cencom

saw it, particularly since enough Star Union people had begun to worry about you Galestrals by then to keep up the pressure for increasing walker strength. So when Captain Witter came back to Ragnor, he was still a Ranger officer, but he was also a Cencom investigator with instructions to bring the Ragnor Campaign to a negotiated end--and with the Cencom Seal to back him up, however he wanted to go about it.

"Of course, he still had to convince the Mailliards then, and *that* wasn't easy. We--my group--heard one day that a Ranger captain had got a Mailliard group to give up without a fight not fifty miles from us. Everyone figured it was some new Ranger trick, and Captain Witter became a prime sneak-hunter target. I was sixteen by then and my group's best sneak-hunter, so I went out to collect his head myself. Came pretty close to doing it, too--closer than anyone else before or after. But I got caught and--"

Ilken checked, blinked a few times, glanced around. The blood substitute container had been detached from her arm, and Jill Hastings sat in a chair a few feet away looking at her.

"Stuff's worn off, Jill," Ilken said.

"Has it?" said Jill.

"Yes. Just noticed I don't have to go on telling you any more."

Jill smiled, stood up. "All right. The drug does have a quite transitory effect. And the patch-up surgery's finished. I'll get your clothes."

. . .

Half a dozen aircars and a transport from the Star Union Base reached the area of the attack some two hours after Crowell's call; and the Galestrals took their leave. Crowell had the on-the-spot technical investigation he'd wanted carried out, supervised by Guy Hansen. His damaged car, the wrecked spaceskiff and its dead pilot were then loaded on the transport. Within forty minutes, the Star Union group was on its way back to the Base.

It had become evident by that time that Crowell's instructions to Herrick had caused considerable disturbance among Base personnel. Dr. John Sutton, the expedition's director and scientific head, called twice to protest against the highhanded and insulting restriction of Public Servant Betheny of Varien to her quarters. He said he intended to record an official complaint with Cencom. Crowell told him he would be given an opportunity to do just that within the next few hours. Meanwhile, the Public Servant would remain under guard.

Crowell was driving one of the Base cars, Hansen beside him, Ilken and Dr. Bates in the rear of the car. After Dr. Sutton's second call, Crowell said to Hansen, "You've known Betheny for a number of years, haven't you?"

Hansen nodded. "I knew her rather well for a while." Born in Varien, newest and greatest of the Star Union's all-swimmer cities, Guy Hansen, like Crowell, had made an early decision to develop the capabilities of a norm-g walker. He'd been active nonetheless for a number of years in the Swimmer League. Cencom records listed him as being now politically uncommitted. It proved nothing in itself, but in the few days Crowell had been on Kulkoor, he'd decided Hansen was one of three men on the Base he'd trust completely in an emergency. Dr. Bates was another. Herrick, a veteran of the

Ragnor Campaign and commander of the Base's small security force, was the third.

Crowell said, "When I was sent here to check into the problems the Base has been having, the League put heavy pressure on Cencom to allow Betheny to come out simultaneously. The argument was that the League's interests must also be officially represented on Kulkoor. I thought it a little odd at the time that they'd risk one of their leaders in what's regarded as an unpredictable and potentially dangerous situation."

Hansen glanced over at him. "Perhaps you're beginning to see why."

"Perhaps I am. She's been here four days and seems to have three fourths of our walker personnel eating out of her hand. Is arranging murders another specialty of hers?"

Hansen shrugged. "I never enjoyed the League leadership's confidence enough to answer that. But Betheny is *homo universalis* with a vengeance. In other words, completely ruthless when the League's interests are involved--and getting the domes contract on the Kulkoor project should be the League's biggest current goal. She'd hardly be here otherwise."

"Why not?"

"She detests being on or anywhere near the surface of a planet. I know that about her."

Crowell grunted. "So that's why she brought her private psychiatrist along...." He added, "Once I was out of the way, along with Lieutenant Tegeler--and probably with any evidence of the attack also safely out of the way--Betheny would have had authority at the Base as the ranking Star Union official on Kulkoor."



"Only for as much time as it would take Cencom to get another representative equipped with the Cencom Seal out here," Hansen remarked.

"Four weeks, more or less," said Crowell. "Completely ruthless--it's a safe guess that enough would have happened in that time to buy the League its domes contract."

Hansen looked uneasy. "What, actually, could Betheny do?"

"I'm thinking of a number of things I could be doing in that position." Crowell shrugged. "Further unexplained disappearances. More and increasingly serious problems with the quick-growth crops and food animals. A limited number of virus fatalities at the Base. It could be carried further, but too much wouldn't really be necessary. Cencom would be suspicious, of course, but by then it wouldn't have much choice. Betheny has Public Servant immunity, and there'd be no time for lengthy investigations."

Hansen said, "If it isn't a secret, what's the deadline for the decision on whether Kulkoor mining is to be carried out by walker outfits or under swimmer domes?"

"There's no secret as far as I'm concerned," Crowell said. "Eight weeks should be the limit, if operations are to start as agreed on by the end of the year. There's no reason to think the Galestral Company won't be ready to begin mining at that time. So Cencom can't wait. If there's any remaining doubt about the feasibility of walker operations, it will decide for the domes."

Hansen nodded. "I can see Betheny's motivation," he said. "But it seems to me she'd need more help than she'd get from the ship that brought her here if she's to do what you think she has in mind."

"She would," Crowell agreed. "So we'll assume the help's already here. Otherwise, having me killed wouldn't have made much sense. She took a longer chance than she should have, in any case, in trying to have it done in that particular manner."

Hansen said reflectively, "It may not have looked that way to her, or to her advisers. I'm no combat specialist—but logically those skiffs should have finished your car on the first pass, shouldn't they?"

"Ordinarily, two armed spaceskiffs will slap down a guncar, yes." The standard guncar, Crowell thought. As Cencom investigator on Ragnor, where some of his sincerest enemies had worn the Star Union's Ranger uniform, he'd taken the precaution of flying a car with nonstandard armament for four years. For three and a half of those years, Ilken had been his gunner. The car they'd used today was of the same type. The odds hadn't been what they seemed.

The Base comm office presently connected Captain Bymer of the sentinel ship with Crowell. Bymer had reported previously that the sentinel's automatic scanning devices had recorded no traces of another space vessel at the time of the attack by the skiffs. In the meantime, he'd carried out a search run about Kulkoor, with equally negative results. The raider evidently had withdrawn beyond scanning range after losing contact with the skiffs. The sentinel ship now had resumed its orbital station above the Star Union Base. It would remain alerted for immediate action.

When Crowell's airborne cavalcade arrived at the Base, he found a delegation waiting for him, headed by Dr. John Sutton, who came forward as soon as Crowell stepped down from the car. The rest of the group remained where they were, expressions indicating varying degrees of disapproval.

"Captain Witter," Dr. Sutton said, "we realize you have reason

enough to be disturbed by the murderous attack on you. But such a matter hardly calls for hasty decisions! We suggest that you join us in my office, where the situation can be discussed and due consideration given to the measures that should be taken."

"Who is we, Dr. Sutton?" Crowell asked.

"Why--" Dr. Sutton looked surprised, glanced back at his companions. "Why, my senior department heads over there, of course!"

"Of course," said Crowell. "Well, it's an excellent suggestion! If you and the other gentlemen will go to the office, we--that's Dr. Bates, Mr. Hansen, Lieutenant Tegeler and I--will meet you there presently. There's some business to be taken care of first."

Dr. Sutton frowned. Crowell jerked his head up at the open car lock in the guard screens. "Six vehicles are lining up out there," he observed, "and in a few moments they'll start coming down exactly where you and your colleagues are standing."

The scientific body withdrew, looking disgruntled. The transport moved down through the lock, followed by the guncars. Herrick had appeared, and Crowell started issuing instructions. Hansen went to the mapping office. Dr. Bates had the skiff pilot's body taken to his laboratory. With Herrick in charge of the other work, Crowell turned to Ilken. "What's Bates' medical opinion on your legs?"

She grinned briefly. "Spray's been cleaned out. That part's all right. I'm to stay off them the next few days."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Not likely!"

"All right. Let's get to our quarters and pick up some equipment. Then we'll pay Betheny a visit."

They set off. There was a trace of stiffness in Ilken's walk. The advice given her by Dr. Bates was probably good. But there might be critical developments in the following hours, and if Ilken felt able to operate, Crowell wanted her beside him.

She said, "Think there's something wrong on Bymer's ship, don't you?"

"Bound to be," Crowell agreed. "We were tracked after we left the Base this morning. Those skiffs didn't come flying around the curve of the planet to look for us--they were dropped into atmosphere directly overhead. So the swimmer ship was showing in Bymer's scanners. He's lying to us, or somebody else has edited the scan tapes and lied to him. After things get straightened out enough around here, we'll go up in the shuttle and check. Until then, we won't mention that matter. What did you think of Jill Hastings, by the way?"

Ilken shrugged. "She's plenty smart. Otherwise, I'm not at all sure."

Crowell nodded. "About the impression I had of the three of them. I'd very much like to know exactly what Farquhar is doing on Kulkoor... Biota analyst!" He scratched his jaw. "Well, we'd better not discount the Galestrals in anything that goes on here--even if there are only four of them on the planet."

"We don't know that's all there are," Ilken said.

"No, we don't."

The short entry passage into the almost globular structure which enclosed the living quarters of Betheny of Varien on the Star Union Base was subject to the pull of Kulkoor's gravity. Betheny and her swimmer attendants came through it only in skim bubbles. Guide rods for the use of visitors hung from the walls. Crowell and Ilken equipped themselves with one as they came in.

They'd made some minor adjustments for the null-g visit. Loose clothing had been discarded, shirts tucked under belts. Ilken's dark hair was drawn into a tight smooth coil at the back of her head. The pair of Mailliard tarsh knives normally carried inside her jacket was fastened to her belt, one on each side.

At the end of the passage, gravity ended. So did any similarity to a norm-g residential dwelling. The structure had been brought along, collapsed, on the swimmer ship which carried Betheny to Kulkoor. Expanded, the globe took up eight times as much space as the quarters assigned to Crowell on the Base. Within, all earlier architectural rules had been swept aside by a design intended only to serve null-g's needs and pleasures. The curving walls of the section beyond the passage glowed softly; furnishings swam in barely visible spider webbing. It was a functional arrangement which had sweep and beauty. As Crowell and Ilken moved into the section on a guide current, day brightness grew up in it. Air stirred with cool freshness, and there was a blending of background sounds, barely noticeable until one began listening for them, which impressed the mind as the sounds of life.

It was a familiar pattern to Crowell; his childhood had been spent in

such surroundings. He hadn't known then what it meant, but in time he'd felt something vaguely oppressive about it. Later he'd understood. Swimmer art, functional art in particular, was highly advanced. Through it the swimmer created, very skillfully, the illusion of his own universe, one he could take with him wherever he went. What had oppressed Crowell had been the almost unconscious sense of being barred by the illusion from the realities of the universe.

Having found his way out of the illusion, he no longer had such feelings about it. He'd drifted with Ilken toward the center of the section. In relationship to each other, they'd remained vertical, moving forward together on the entry current until it blended into other guide currents in the section. There were two round exits, a large one in front of them, another overhead, both veiled by the rippling tints of sight and sound barriers. They'd announced themselves from outside the structure, and the announcement had been acknowledged by Dr. Torres, one of Betheny's two companions. But Betheny appeared now in no hurry to receive them.

It was Dr. Torres who came in by the round opening over their heads some two minutes later. Crowell and Ilken shifted position to face her. The psychiatrist was a swimmer giant of the intermediate stage, aging but lithe, with the magnetic good looks and compelling personality almost characteristic of her type. She wore swimmer attire, a thin copper tunic which left her strong brown arms and legs uncovered. As she approached, the section's light gleamed for an instant from the bronze designs on her skull, depilated or perhaps hairless from birth.

"Captain Witter, Lieutenant Tegeler," she said. "Betheny will join us in a moment. Perhaps you'd like to tell me the reason for your visit."

"Dr. Sutton would refer to it as the situation," Crowell said.

"The situation? We were informed that an attempt was made to kill you some hours ago."

"It was."

Dr. Torres nodded. "Would you care to tell me about it in detail?"

"I'm sure you've already been told about it in as much detail as is necessary," Crowell said. "Betheny has made friends here."

"So she has." The psychiatrist's fine dark eyes regarded Crowell with the barest suggestion of mockery. "Captain Witter, you're acting under Cencom Seal, which at present gives you a certain degree of authority. But perhaps I should caution you not to become too zealous in your use of it. You seem to have formed a mental connection between the Public Servant's presence on the Base and the attack on you. I need hardly remind you that if you should violate the Public Servant's immunity in any way because of such suspicions, you'd be guilty of a capital crime."

"You needn't remind me," Crowell agreed. "And now, since I'm sure Betheny of Varien is listening to what's being said, perhaps she'll join us--or should we join her?"

Betheny's finely chiseled features suggested a curious blend of arrogance and outgoing warmth. On level ground, she would have stood four inches taller than Crowell. Her shoulders were wider; her weight might be almost twice his. For all her size, she remained a superbly feminine being--the current culmination of *homo universalis*, beautiful, maternal, infinitely appealing. It was a good part of the strength of the Swimmer League that its leaders were such parent figures, benevolent and magnificent. They were admired, desired, trusted. Even dedicated walkers surrendered to

the attraction. And it had been, Crowell thought, a calculated move to send Betheny rather than a male counterpart to Kulkoor. The Star Union expedition's department heads were men.

He sensed the attraction himself when Betheny appeared, dressed as she would be when she went out among walkers, in a silver suit and helmet. She was accompanied by a young woman with short brown hair, an intermediate swimmer type like Dr. Torres—a bodyguard, carrying a sidearm.

Crowell said, addressing Betheny, "I have some reason to believe that there's a League conspiracy to defeat the purpose of the Star Union's expedition on Kulkoor. The immunities of a Public Servant will be respected if possible, but I can't allow you to interfere with an investigation of that possibility."

"How would you prevent it?" Betheny said.

"I've considered having the three of you put temporarily under sedation."

The bodyguard glanced at Betheny. Betheny shook her head.

"We have no intention of interfering with your investigation, Captain Witter," she said.

"Very well," Crowell said. "In that case, you'll remain with me while Lieutenant Tegeler goes over your quarters."

Betheny smiled. "What will she be looking for?"

"Evidence of the conspiracy," Crowell said.



When Crowell and Ilken arrived at Dr. Sutton's office, Dr. Sutton turned immediately to Crowell. He appeared again to be acting as spokesman for the group, to which Hansen and Dr. Bates had added themselves.

"The opinion's been expressed by several here," Dr. Sutton told Crowell, "that the incident this morning was staged by Galestrals, with the purpose of heightening the distrust which divides some of our Star Union citizens in the critical area of Kulkoor. Dr. Bates informs us that the man you shot shows null-g swimmer modifications. There is, of course, the possibility that the Galestrals have developed a swimmer type."

"Yes," Crowell agreed, "that does seem possible."

Dr. Sutton glanced at the others.

"They also could have obtained Star Union equipment to divert suspicion from themselves if the operation failed."

Crowell nodded. "Or they could have manufactured identical equipment. Why not? Mr. Hansen, have you told these gentlemen about the damage done to the surveillance instruments?"

"No," Hansen said. "I thought I should wait until this discussion got started."

"Please do it now."

Hansen said to the group, "A few of you have been aware that the aerial mapping system being established on the Base can be used

as a form of continuous planetary surveillance. It would be random and incomplete, but it should disclose any significant violations of the Santrask Agreement, which was its purpose.

"A few hours ago--shortly before the attack on Captain Witter's aircar--the system became inoperative. We've established meanwhile that the damage was caused by miniaturized destructive devices, activated from outside the mapping section."

"And perhaps from outside the Base?" said Dr. Sutton who was listening closely.

Hansen shrugged. "That's possible. At any rate, it was sabotage--and the devices must have been installed by some trained member of our personnel."

"You're suggesting," one of the other men said, "that the surveillance system was put out of action to keep the details of the attack on Captain Witter from being recorded by an aerial unit. Would that have happened if the system had been operating?"

"Only by a rather unlikely coincidence," Hansen said. "Naturally, the saboteurs may not have realized that they'd run a smaller risk of arousing suspicion by leaving the system intact."

Dr. Sutton said, "All that might seem to prove is that there is, in fact, at least one saboteur on the Base. I'm not sure I consider it proved! But let's concede the point. The question remains then whether the agency behind the sabotage is the Swimmer League or the Galestral Company. Men can be bought, and I'm sure no one here assumes that some Star Union citizens couldn't be induced to turn traitor."

"That would be a thoughtless assumption, to say the least," Crowell

agreed. "However, one might have expected a Galestral agent to do a more permanent job on the surveillance system--Mr. Hansen expects to have it back in operation in less than a week." He placed one of two boxed instruments he'd brought into the office on a table and opened it. "In any case," he went on, "if there's someone like that around, it won't be long before we establish the fact."

Dr. Sutton eyed the instrument. "What do you have there?"

"An interrogator," Crowell told him. "Developed originally for the Ragnor Rangers. Truthful information was often quite difficult to get by any other means from Mailliard prisoners. This device produced it regularly. There's nothing about it to fight because it doesn't seem to do anything."

"You intend to question the Base personnel?"

"Of course." Crowell smiled at the group. "Beginning with the assembled heads of the major departments here! After clearing you, we'll work down through the ranks. It's a short process. We'll have put everyone through it in less than three hours."

They'd stiffened. Then Hansen laughed. "The logical step! Start with me."

Crowell turned to Dr. Sutton. "What's behind that door?"

"My secretary's office."

"Is she occupying it at the moment?"

"No."

"Then I'll check you out there, one at a time. Now we must bear in mind the possibility that a hired Galestral spy or a League

conspirator is a member of this group. You've observed that Lieutenant Tegeler and I are armed. We'll keep our weapons on hand throughout the interrogation. Lieutenant Tegeler will remain in this office to watch the group while I question you individually."

Dr. Sutton's color had heightened. "That hardly seems necessary!"

This time, he found no support among his fellows. Fifteen minutes later, Crowell came out of the side office with the last of them and announced, "All right--everyone in this room has proved to be free of evil intentions. We can now start going through your departments. With your permission, Dr. Sutton, I'll continue to use your offices for it."

Dr. Sutton said, "I don't understand how that device operates. It pronounced a few dozen words at random. Nothing else happened. And yet you seem confident that I'm innocent in the matter."

"The words weren't pronounced at random," Crowell said, "and the instrument was interpreting your reactions to them. All it really showed was that none of you is involved in a conspiracy to pervert the legitimate activities of the Base. But that's all we need to know at the moment." He opened the second case he'd brought in. "Here's something else. No doubt most of you can see what it is."

"A transmitter, of course," said Hansen. He frowned.

"You recognize the type?" asked Crowell.

"Yes." Hansen picked up the transmitter, turned it around, set it back again. "An extremely powerful transmitter!" He looked at Crowell. "Why are you showing it to us?"

"It's powerful enough," said Crowell, "to push a call halfway through the Kulkoor System. It's well enough shielded to make its use

undetectable to anyone but the receiver. I'm showing it to you because Lieutenant Tegeler removed it from its place of concealment in the Public Servant's quarters just before we came here."

There was an abrupt disturbed murmur of voices. One of the men asked, "Exactly what are you suggesting, Captain Witter?"

"Draw your own conclusions. Betheny's immunity covers her personal attendants. I can't interrogate those three. But I hardly feel it's necessary. And, Dr. Sutton, I think we can agree it's most unlikely that the Public Servant will turn out to be a Galestral agent?"

Dr. Sutton shook his head, cleared his throat. "I'm beginning to think this is a very bad business!"

"Perhaps it is," said Crowell. "Now let's start running the departments through the quiz. I'm putting you all on your honor not to mention the purpose of the check to anyone." He looked at Ilken. "Tell Herrick to station two guards in the office. Somebody might suspect what we're doing anyway and become a little desperate."

## 5

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There was no trouble in Dr. Sutton's office, but somebody did become desperate. Herrick got a call from a storehouse clerk about unusual activity in the area. Supply Chief Willis, assisted by a man identified as Merriman, an aerial surveyor, was engaged in dumping unopened cases into the disposal; and Willis had ordered other

storehouse personnel out of the structure. Herrick went there hurriedly with two security men. They met the two on the way out, and Willis and Merriman retreated into the disposal room. When Herrick's group forced its way through the door, the two stood before the activated disposal screen. Merriman was white-faced. Willis was grinning.

"Merriman would have surrendered," Herrick reported to Crowell. "But he didn't get the chance. Willis shoved him into the screen, then waved his hand at us and walked into the screen himself. We didn't have time to stop him."

There'd been two brief flashes of light, and the men were gone. Considerable speculation followed as to what Willis had been getting rid of, and why he'd preferred to murder an associate and kill himself to letting either be interrogated. Dr. Bates suggested that some of the cases might have contained biological agents. Experimental food crops and livestock, brought in to determine whether major projects on Kulkoor could become partly self-supporting, had been seriously affected by toxins of bacterial type, which hadn't yet been located in native life forms. The carriers could have been developed elsewhere, released here, to give further weight to arguments in favor of establishing a complete system of swimmer domes on Kulkoor. Laboratory-created diseases could have been scheduled to strike personnel next. Willis was in a position to conceal the fact that such materials had been delivered to the Base; and Merriman could have distributed them outside while appearing to be going about his work.

Crowell wasn't giving much attention to theories. Having started the initial investigation, it was essential to carry it through as quickly as possible, identify those involved in the conspiracy and get them out of action. Details and proof could wait. By mid-afternoon, he'd finished checking out all personnel on the Base and those flown in

from outlying stations for the purpose. He wound up with eight prisoners--fewer than he'd expected. The crew of the sentinel ship remained to be investigated. There'd been no communication between ship and Base in the interval.

Ilken inquired, "Be legal to take Betheny and those other two up to the ship and freeze them?"

"It should be legal in the circumstances," Crowell said. "I could call it another form of detention. But I'll keep her down here. If she has other moves to make, I'd rather she makes them as soon as possible. The ship might become our lifeline. I wouldn't feel easy about having Betheny on it even in a frozen state."

"Think somebody might decide to let her wake up?"

Crowell shrugged. "You saw the effect she's had on our Base administration in the few days she's been around. She's here because she carries an overcharge of the *universalis* appeal. We'd better not take chances with it."

He appointed Hansen to act as Cencom's representative in his absence, contacted Captain Bymer and told him to send down the landing shuttle to take material evidence of the attack by the spaceskiffs on board for storage. He didn't mention that he and Ilken also would arrive on the shuttle.

. . .

The body of the spaceskiff pilot was taken to the sentinel ship's

freezer and placed in a compartment. Leaving the section with Captain Bymer and Ilken, Crowell said, "Captain, there's a chance that some members of your crew have notions about taking over the ship. We've brought the means of identifying them with us. How would you suggest going about it without tipping them off?"

Bymer studied him a moment, said, "Let's go to the instrument room."

They went there, and Bymer dismissed the two men on duty. After they'd left, he said coldly, "The instrument room controls the ship, and I've now sealed it. Please tell me specifically what you suspect."

"Since we talked last," Crowell said, "we've uncovered evidence of a swimmer conspiracy on the Base. It's not a minor matter--the Public Servant is involved. We've nabbed the conspirators and cleared the rest of the Base personnel. You'll understand that we must start here by clearing you."

Captain Bymer's face reddened slowly. He said, "I have no objection to that."

Ilken took the interrogator out of its case and placed it on a table.

"Thank you, Captain," Crowell said presently. "You're not a swimmer conspirator--but you certainly have people on board who are. Your area scanners were in operation at the time my car was attacked by the spaceskiffs, weren't they?"

"They're in continuous automatic operation while we're at station," Bymer acknowledged. He hesitated. "You feel the ship that dispatched the skiffs should have been recorded?"

"Yes." Crowell described the details which made it seem the ship must have been in space approximately above the point of ambush.



Bymer nodded. His expression was now grim. "After your call, I checked the tapes supposedly covering that time period," he said. "They showed nothing. But tapes can be replaced. Lieutenant Jones was monitoring the scanning devices at the time. He was alone in the instrument room."

"Who assigned him to the duty?"

"First Officer Henderson." Bymer added, "Henderson's served with me for over four years."

"Well," Crowell said, "we'd better start with those two."

Lieutenant Alfred Jones was an apple-cheeked young man whose face remained respectfully puzzled as he listened to the disconnected string of words coming from a small instrument. The instrument disclosed to Crowell that the lieutenant reacted strongly to eight of those words. Without looking up, Crowell observed, "Good enough!"

Lieutenant Jones closed his eyes and slumped down on the table between them. Standing eight feet behind Jones, Captain Bymer shut off a small device and put it in his pocket. Together, he and Crowell carried the unconscious young man into an adjoining room and left him lying on the floor.

Summoned to the instrument room, First Officer Henderson strolled in smiling and pointing a gun at Bymer and Crowell. Then he dropped the gun with a gasp, looked down white-faced at the Mailliard tarsh transfixing his wrist, and fainted.

"Under the circumstances," Crowell remarked, as Ilken came forward from the door of the other room, "we'd better check out the ship's surgeon next...."

There were no further problems. The Second Engineer and two of the remaining members of Captain Bymer's crew reacted positively to the swimmer test. They, the First Officer and Lieutenant Jones went into the personnel freezer. So did the eight prisoners Crowell then had brought up from the Base in the shuttle.

"There's a strong probability," he said to Bymer, "that a swimmer group is hidden out somewhere on Kulkoor, waiting for instructions from Betheny. Without her cooperation, we're not likely to locate them until they make a move. But if we can put the swimmer ship out of commission, the planetside's group's activities will be sharply restricted. What do you think of our chances of finding the ship?"

Captain Bymer said, "You're assuming it's remained in the Kulkoor System?" The computer technicians had restructured the scanning tape sections Lieutenant Jones had deleted from the record. The raider, clearly visible for a full twenty-five minutes before vanishing behind the curve of the planet, had been identified as the vessel which brought Betheny and her retinue to Kulkoor four days before.

"Definitely," said Crowell. "Getting Lieutenant Tegeler and myself killed was simply to be one step in an overall plan designed to put the Swimmer League in effective control of the Kulkoor Project. Whatever that plan was, the ship has a role in it. They've no way of knowing yet that we've taken countermeasures and have Betheny isolated, so they're somewhere within maximum transmitter range, ready to pick up orders. But that's still a great deal of space to go hunting around in at random."

Captain Bymer blinked reflectively.

"We shouldn't have to hunt for them at random...."

He explained. The swimmer ship wasn't likely to be drifting in open

space while it waited. The Kulkoor System was a dirty one--masses of debris circling the sun between and beyond the four planets. The edges of such a meteoric cloud were the place to look for the raider; and there were a number of large ones currently not far from Kulkoor. They could use the ship computers to determine the most promising spots to start looking.

Crowell got in touch with Guy Hansen on the Base. "We'll have a better chance to sneak up on them if we maintain transmitter silence," he said. "It may take a couple of days. You needn't mention why we're maintaining silence. Call us only if you think there's a genuine emergency building up. We'll respond then, and be available shortly thereafter."

## 6

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Grant Gage switched off the message drone transcriber, leaned back in his chair, flipped on ship intercom. "Jill?"

"I'm in here," Jill's voice announced from the adjoining communicator room.

"Oh! Didn't hear you go in. What date was it that Farquhar last contacted us?"

"Eight planet days ago. Check it against the Galestral calendar."

Grant's gaze shifted to the console calendars. "Getting a response?"

The usual kind. His truck's recording the call. Farquhar either isn't at home, or doesn't want to talk. I said one of the Zuron cameras had disappeared, and asked him to call back if he was interested in hearing the details." She'd come to the door as she spoke. Grant regarded her a moment. Survey Technician Second Class. Multilevel training. Four-year veteran of the Galestral Space Exploration Corps at age twenty-two. Three completed outworld tours. Jill Hastings. One of Galestral's more valuable employee-shareholders.

"I've finished the standard reports," he said. He tapped the intercom switch. "Ned?"

The intercom grunted. "About done."

"Got a report we can feed the drone?"

"Doing that now. Be there in three-four minutes."

Intercom off again. Grant said to Jill, "How about shaping up breakfast for three?"

"We're going back out?"

"Uh-huh. I want to make a run inland, up to the area of the ghost camp. If it's my lucky day, there'll be neither fog nor rain on the hills and we'll find and bag one of those big birds."

Jill set her face in prim lines, recited in a good-girl voice, "Company orders state *clearly* that at present we are to concern ourselves with the quote Kulkoor Problem unquote *only* to the extent we are instructed to do so by Biota Analyst First Class Frank Farquhar! We have received no--"

"I'm aware of it. And the Biota Analyst may have good reasons for his games, but I'm beginning to get tired of them. Company orders

don't say we can't go hunting. Go rustle up the grub, woman! You and Ned can catch up on sleep on the way."

Jill got busy in the mess. She heard Ned Brock come along the passage presently, on his way to the drone room. Her thoughts remained preoccupied with Frank Farquhar. Almost all they knew about him was what they'd learned since his arrival on Kulkoor, and that was chiefly that he was a loner by preference. He might find it an asset in his line of work, but he carried it to irritating extremes. He'd landed with his own supplies and equipment--a small aircar, an airtruck with a laboratory, a drone receiver and supply of message drones. His reports went separately to Galestral. It probably would be two days before they heard from him next; and the chances were it would be nothing but a recorded message then. He was supposed to check in with his back-up team every ten planet days, solely to let them know he was still around. So far, he'd done it. If two weeks went by without word from him and they couldn't make contact with him, they were to assume he'd run afoul of the Kulkoor Problem and was dead or disabled. They'd notify Galestral of the fact and start seeing what they could do about the problem themselves. If they failed in turn to solve it, the Galestral Company would take both failures into account in selecting the personnel who were to form its new front line on Kulkoor.

In the meantime, they ran routine checks, adjusted and repositioned survey instruments, stood by to carry out the occasional instructions Farquhar had for them, and maintained the security precautions called for by Condition Abnormal. The last meant that their ship was stationed six hundred feet in the air, moored by magnetic beam to Kulkoor's surface. They left the ship and returned to it by aircar, and their Suesvant rifles went wherever they went.

Until this morning, that had been all.

• • •

That morning, coming back from a dawn check of the survey devices, Ned and Jill discovered that one of the Zuron cameras set up in the vicinity of the hovering spaceship was gone. The Zurons, stilt-mounted twenty feet above the ground, swiveled toward, focused on and took pictures of any moving object more than six inches in diameter which came within a two-hundred-yard range. A large variety of Kulkoor fauna had been catalogued in this manner; but less than a dozen species turned out to be of interest to Farquhar, for whose benefit the cameras were being operated. During the past weeks, the survey team had collected a sample of each of those species for him; he'd be picking them up when he got around to it. He hadn't said why he was interested; and whatever the assorted animals had in common remained obscure to the team.

The missing camera introduced a new factor. The shaft supporting it had been snapped off near the upper end, and the broken section had vanished with the camera. The Zurons were protected by deterrent energy fields which discouraged large animals from running into the stilts and smaller ones from climbing them. Until now, they'd been effective. Ned Brock went over the surrounding ground with a tracker and picked up no indication that anything had come near the stilt during the night.

But something could have come flying up to it--something powerful enough to break the metal shaft--something which then hadn't simply let the Zuron fall to the ground but had carried it away.

They'd come across only one life form on Kulkoor that might be

capable of doing both; and that was the big winged forest hunter who also--just possibly--could be responsible for the fact that there was a mysteriously abandoned mining camp on Kulkoor. It hadn't been observed so far down in the plains, but there was nothing to keep it from going there.

"Let's assume for now that's what it was," said Grant. "The question is why it did it."

That, indeed, was the question. It could have been an accident. A simple-witted predator, coming into the Zuron's range and catching the camera's motion as it swung toward it, might attack instinctively, wrench the Zuron off and carry it away, simply because it hadn't realized that what it grasped wasn't edible.

Ned Brock said, "That's how it almost has to have happened. But I keep thinking--"

"Ned, it's what we're all thinking," said Jill.

On Galestral, it wouldn't have been considered an accident. Too many of the indigenous life forms there, whipped back eventually out of the sections of the planet men wanted for themselves, had been intelligent enough to understand that man's instruments were his allies. Such a creature, approaching stealthily at night for a closer look at the floating ship and coming across the Zuron, might have broken the camera away and disposed of it to keep its presence from being reported, even though it couldn't know how the report would be made.

Until now, the only thing which might hint that any of Kulkoor's native life had reached that level of intelligence was whatever had occurred at the mining camp on the mountain slopes, months before. Jill could understand why Grant wanted to examine a specimen of the big flier

they'd seen moving with shadowy quickness through the nearby forests.

A special report on the loss of the Zuron, and the circumstances under which it had been lost, was added to the contents of the message drone. Ned had calculated the degree of force required to snap the camera shaft; the figure should raise a few eyebrows on Galestral. The team kept its speculations to itself. Speculation in that area remained Farquhar's business at present.

They dispatched the drone, had their breakfast, set out.

• • •

Ned had taken Grant at his word and stretched out in the back of the car to catch up on sack time lost by the dawn patrol. Jill, not at all sleepy, took the seat behind Grant, Suesvant lying across her knees. Her thoughts roamed, tinged with discontent.

Galestral, the Galestral Company, and the Star Union... the only significant powers in this galactic region. Perhaps equal powers effectively, though Galestral maintained a stable population of thirty-two million people, while the Star Union's citizens numbered over half a billion--but half a billion scattered widely in space cities and mobile asteroid bases, divided further by political manipulations and walker and swimmer factions. Now that the Galestral Company had begun to move back into space, there'd been the risk of a serious clash of interests with the Star Union.

The Santrask Agreement, set up eight years before, had been



designed to minimize that risk. It regulated the exploitation of uncolonized and unclaimed worlds for the benefit of any human government willing to abide by its terms. The discovery of a profusion of heavy metal pockets on Kulkoor had been the first significant test of the Agreement. Their value was immense and estimates of the value kept being increased as surveys continued. If it hadn't been immense, the exploitation of Kulkoor couldn't have been considered. It lay almost at the rim of explored space, as distant from the closest Star Union bases as from Galestral, still farther from most of the scattered colony worlds of the minor Santrask powers. Even message drones took weeks to reach it. Ferrying in and maintaining equipment for large-scale mining operations would be a project which should strain the resources of the Galestral Company and the Star Union. The lesser Santrask signatories couldn't begin to undertake such projects. The Star Union would act as their agent on Kulkoor.

And now the operations had been stalled before they began. Kulkoor had presented the human intruders with a riddle....

Superficially, it mightn't seem too significant. Grant and Jill had been among the first survey teams assigned to Kulkoor. Starting out on an uncharted area one morning, they'd spotted mining machinery and a space shuttle on a forested mountain slope below. Legitimate mining work wasn't scheduled to begin for more than another year. They'd notified other teams, dropped down to investigate.

Some surface mining had been done in the area. The shuttle was partly loaded with ore. But nobody was in sight; and the machines evidently hadn't been used recently. It wasn't until they'd landed that they discovered the camp, set up among trees nearby and concealed from the sky by a camouflage effect. The camp area was silent, appeared deserted, but they waited until another Galestral car was circling overhead before they approached it, Suesvants held

fire-ready.

Jill could recall the growing eeriness of that experience. Brown forest mold, small clumps of dry vegetation, dead branches littered the camp, carried in by gusts of wind. A few small animals scuttled away from them. Nothing else stirred. They saw what should be the control shack some fifty yards from the point they'd entered. They went up to it, moving warily. The shack had no windows, and its door was closed. While Jill covered him from twelve feet away, Grant touched the door handle, shifted it cautiously. Unlocked. Holding the Suesvant in one hand, he threw the door back.

The interior of the shack was brightly lit and obviously unoccupied. They didn't enter immediately. From the door, their gaze shifted about the room. Office of the camp boss. Control panel along one wall. Glassy shimmer of a dust and small-vermin screen across the doorspace. The normal degree of disorder.... From the appearance of it, whoever had worked here might have stepped out of the place ten minutes ago. Jill's skin was prickling; she wasn't sure why.

Grant went in, opened the camouflage field switch. Pools of pale sunlight appeared suddenly in the camp area between the trees. A third aircar had arrived by then. Its crew joined Grant and Jill, and they went through the rest of the camp. There was no one, living or dead, in the shelters, nothing to indicate that the eruption of some local plague had driven away the men. Nor was there anything to suggest violence or a planned departure. The camp looked normal except for the degree of disturbance which could be accounted for by prowling animals, wind and rain. The machinery was set up to work. The miners' personal belongings lay about in the shelters; it was possible to calculate from them that there had been forty-three men quartered here. Light and heating systems were functioning, and most of the force screens designed to keep vermin out of the shelters were powered. The camouflage field was nearly exhausted.

What had become of the men? The shuttle had been their only link with the ore carrier which had brought them to Kulkoor but presumably had come no closer than the flow of meteorite clouds nearest the planet where it would have been almost safe from chance detection. And the shuttle stood here, as enigmatic as the rest of it. Where had they gone? Why had they gone?

The questions remained unanswered. Biotracker readings indicated there had been no human beings in the camp area for at least a month before Grant and Jill arrived. The ore carrier presumably had left when the shuttle failed to return from the planet. Nothing was found to show from where it had come. The shuttle and most of the other machinery were Star Union manufacture, decades old. They could have been picked up almost anywhere. Personal belongings provided no clues. A ragtag outfit, probably from some regressed walker colony, which had got wind of the Kulkoor bonanza and considered it worth the long haul to slip in and load up what it could before authorized mining operations began and the planet came under a degree of surveillance which made private projects impossible.

That was the appearance of it.

It could have been a deliberate mystification. It could have been a number of other things, which might or might not turn out to have wider significance. In any case, every effort must be made to explain what had happened before major operations on Kulkoor were started. The Galestral Company and Cencom were agreed on that. They went about their efforts to obtain the explanation in different ways.

The Galestral Company proceeded by the book, by the disciplined rules established in the conquest of its own planet. It left three

observers and a scout ship stationed on Kulkoor, hauled off its other personnel. Grant Gage and Jill Hastings were two of the observers. They were selected for the job because, of the people then on Kulkoor, they were, by their record, the best qualified to handle it. Because there was, also by their record, a streak of the nonconformist in both of them, they were joined by Ned Brock, almost as qualified and by nature a Company man, a stabilizing influence in the team. They were skilled, highly trained people; they weren't to stick out their necks in this matter. A specialist would be sent to do that. The Galestral Company was frugal in the use of human resources. Those it used were expendable when the purpose was worth the price, but they weren't expended if calculation could prevent it.

Cencom, with less direct experience in dealing with abnormal planetary conditions, set up a test project staffed with a hundred and fifty people, to subject Kulkoor to overall analysis during a planned ten-month period. The problem, if it existed, should be brought to light somewhere along the line. The peril, if it arose, would be met by conventional means; the Base was protected by defensive and offensive armament. The sentinel ship, stationed in synchronous orbit above the Base, was equipped to evacuate all personnel as a last resort.

The Star Union project was now beginning its third month. A mapping crew of two had been lost with their aircar. The indications were that they'd attempted to fly through a violent storm in mountainous country. No trace of car or crew had been found; but no one seemed inclined to blame the Kulkoor Problem for the disappearance. An occasional accident of that kind could be expected.

There'd been no other losses.

Jill sighed. The Star Union, by its own lights, was also going by the book on Kulkoor. And the book was getting old. Throughout its two hundred and sixty-three years of existence, Cencom, the tunneled planetoid, still the most formidable space fortress known, had been the Star Union's strategic center. The Galestral Company wasn't much younger.

Between them, they'd grown to dominate the area. You were a Star Union citizen--walker or swimmer; essentially space-oriented, space-housed, in either case. Or you were a working shareholder of the Galestral Company. Galestral was as magnificent a world as Earth ever could have been, but it was the only world like that around. Ragnor never had been able to support as much as half a million Mailliards; and the Mailliards had been regressing technologically for decades before they tangled with the Star Union. Scores of colonies on other worlds led a marginal existence, or dropped below it and failed. Kulkoor, though four fifths of its land surface was cold desert, might have made a better man home than almost all of them.

But that was the way it was at present. Men had moved away from Earth, come this far. Planets that weren't fit for human habitation remained inexhaustible sources of raw material. Motion had stopped; it was time for organization, for consolidation. The Star Union was formed; and presently the Galestral Company split away from the Star Union, conquered the almost unconquerable native terrors of Galestral, and held the planet against all human comers until no more felt tempted to come.

Consolidation continued. It became stagnation, Jill thought. There'd been no change in basic ship design in three hundred years. The ships were good--but only that. They didn't have the range to go unsupported out of this sterile area, far enough to leave the Star Union and the Galestral Company behind.

Far enough to break the strings.

## 7

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It took almost two days to locate the swimmer ship. As Captain Bymer had predicted, it was skimming the fringes of a dense meteor cloud when spotted. It might have spotted the sentinel simultaneously. It edged into the hurtling space avalanche, vanished from instrument detection. It didn't reappear.

Bymer said, "If he tries to cut through that sludge, he's had it! He won't try."

"So where is he?" said Crowell.

"He's put down somewhere--some big rock near the point of entry. He'll come out eventually. But if we wait for that, we may lose him."

"Then let's not wait." Crowell was beginning to like Captain Bymer.

They found the swimmer presently, sitting at the bottom of a deep ragged crevice in one of the larger meteorite chunks. When they signaled it, it drove up from the crevice, guns blazing. The action lasted barely twenty seconds. Then the swimmer was hulled, silenced and blinded, spinning through space. Captain Bymer held fire. A string of spacesuited figures spurted from the wreck. They made no attempt to escape; there was nowhere to go.

An hour later, a fresh load of prisoners was in the personnel freezer,

and the sentinel ship was on its way back to Kulkoor. They hadn't tried to board the swimmer. With its power dead, it was being chewed up by the drift before the last survivor of its crew had been brought into the sentinel.

• • •

Crowell had intended to interrogate some of the captured swimmers at length before returning to the Base. But when he got in contact with Guy Hansen to let him know the period of communicator silence was over, Hansen said, "I think you'd better come down as soon as you can, Crowell."

"Why?" Crowell asked.

"For one thing, you'll have an opportunity to meet that mysterious Galestral biota analyst. Farquhar's spending the night at Station Three."

"Good enough!" Crowell said. "We'll be there as quickly as Captain Bymer can get us back. Anything else?"

"Yes. The Zoology Department's lost a man. Alex Hays. We found his body today some five miles north of Station Three. He'd been killed by an animal--apparently a previously unrecorded species he was trying to collect. That, incidentally, is what brought Farquhar to view."

"How did Farquhar hear about it?"

Hansen said dryly, "It turns out that one person on the Base with whom he's been in fairly regular communicator contact is Dr.

Freemont of Zoology. They've been exchanging information on Kulkoor fauna for the past month. It didn't occur to Freemont to mention it until now. He called Farquhar after the body was found, and Farquhar showed up at the Station some five hours later."

"He wants to look for the animal?" Crowell said.

"I'd assume it. He didn't tell Freemont his purpose.

"Do you know what general type of animal it's supposed to be?"

"A large fur-covered biped. Hays' initial report referred to it as a humanoid giant."

"A--when did he make that initial report?"

"Four planet days ago."

"And Dr. Freemont and the Zoology Department didn't think that was worth mentioning either?"

"It seems," said Hansen, "that the Zoology Department didn't take Alex Hays' story seriously."

. . .

"One might have called Alex a romantic, Captain Witter," Dr. Freemont was saying defensively a few hours later. "To put it more bluntly, he was an overly imaginative young man, and he let the characteristic interfere with his work. Zoology is understaffed, and on more than one previous occasion valuable department time was



wasted in trying to follow up unsubstantiated reports made by him."

Crowell nodded. "I understand. Just what did he report on this occasion--and did he leave notes?"

"We've found no notes. But he did talk a good deal about his experience. Today I checked what he'd told me against what he'd told others, and found that his story was, in fact, rather consistent."

"You're inclined to believe it now?"

"I'm more inclined to believe it than I was. It's possible, after all, that the planet's fauna has developed a biped form, or, at any rate, a large animal which occasionally stands, even walks, on its hind legs. If so, it must be an exceedingly rare species, or it should have been sighted before. Hays was in an aircar, making a routine fauna count, when he saw it. He said he had the impression of looking down at a creature like the mythical ogres of Earth." Dr. Freemont's mouth quirked in distaste. "I took the time to question him about it. More factually then, he claimed it was a biped, with long straight legs, but massive and apelike in the upper part of the body. Its arms were long and heavy. It was apparently very large for that type of structure--Hays estimated it as eight feet in height, with a weight of well over five hundred pounds. It was furred, brown-black in color. Its head was relatively large, with pointed ears or earlike appendages. There were no weapons or other artifacts--in other words, no indications of more than animal intelligence."

Dr. Freemont reflected a moment. "I believe that sums up the description."

"It seems a quite specific one," Crowell said.

"Yes--perhaps more so than one should expect. Alex Hays evidently

did see something. I'm not convinced that what he saw would match his description of it too closely."

"Why do you think that?"

The zoologist shrugged. "Hays said the creature moved quickly. He had it briefly in view at the edge of a stand of forest, saw it again some seconds later as it passed through an opening among the trees. He continued to circle above the forest for over an hour but saw no more of it. I feel he may have used his imagination to supply more than those glimpses actually showed him. He tried to persuade me to have Zoology organize a search for the biped, and collect it. I turned him down. I did call Gerson, who's in charge at Station Three, to check on the story. Gerson has worked together with Hays, and he simply laughed. He assured me there'd never been any indication of such a creature in that area, and, of course, Station Three has gone over the entire vicinity rather thoroughly. Hays asked to be relieved of his regular duties so he could hunt the creature by himself, and I refused."

"So he went after it without authorization?" Crowell said.

"Yes. In part, I'm afraid, because his colleagues had been making something of a joke of the Hays Ogre. I didn't learn until this morning that he'd left the Base yesterday after checking out an aircar. He'd forged my signature on the permit. When he didn't reply to communicator calls, I informed Mr. Hansen that he was missing and might be in trouble."

Crowell looked over at Hansen. Hansen said, "Herrick and I went out in two cars to look for Hays. We found his car within half an hour. It was standing in the open in the general area where he'd reported seeing the biped. What was left of his body was under some bushes a hundred yards away. Part of it had been devoured. His energy

carbine lay thirty feet from the body. It was almost fully charged but set to fire, and something like a fifteen-second burst had been fired from it. Apparently Hays missed."

"Apparently?" said Crowell.

Hansen said, "There were heavy rainstorms in that section during the night. They left no tracks, nothing at all to show what kind of creature killed Hays. We made a search of the surrounding ground, thinking it might have been hurt badly enough by the carbine to go into hiding nearby. We found nothing. The place is on the edge of a dense stretch of forest which extends up into the mountains, and to look further for it seemed useless."

Dr. Freemont remarked, "The condition of Hays' body, incidentally, is no proof that the killer was carnivorous. There are a number of scavenger species in the northern forests which quickly dispose of anything dead or dying."

"Was Hays a reasonably good shot?" Crowell asked.

"I would say so. He liked hunting and brought in many specimens for the department during our first weeks of operation on Kulkoor."

"I was thinking," Crowell said, "that it isn't really easy to miss something big that's coming at you with an energy carbine. He should have had it in his sights for most of those fifteen seconds."

"Unless he panicked," Hansen said.

"Yes, that's possible. What about Farquhar, Doctor? Did he comment in any way on what had happened?"

"He said only that he'd like to find out more about the creature Hays had encountered, and asked me to arrange to have him stay over at

Station Three tonight."

"You know he did show up there?"

"Yes, an hour or two after sundown. At the moment, I'm not sure of the exact time. Dan Gerson called me to say Farquhar had arrived."

Hansen said, "Would you like me to call the Station now and put you in touch with Farquhar?"

Crowell shook his head, looked at his watch. "He may have reasons for not wanting to be in touch with me. The night's almost over anyway. Lieutenant Tegeler and I will fly out to the Station immediately and try to catch Farquhar before he wakes up."

• • •

It was barely first light when Crowell's repaired car came drifting down toward Station Three. The Station was a low wide structure, built against and partly into a rocky slope, two hundred feet below a dark line of forest along the crest of the slope. Ilken, watching the ground screen, said, "Two cars parked down there. Only one belongs to the Station. So Farquhar's still around."

Crowell didn't comment. Mists half veiled the slopes; he hadn't been able to distinguish the cars. A moment later, Ilken frowned. "There's--" Her voice paused; then she said, "Hold the car, Crowell!"

He checked their descent, looked quickly over at her. "Something wrong?"

"Hard to make out." She was adjusting the screen, nodded suddenly. "Take a look!" Her tone was flat.

The two cars were shadowy in the screen, but Crowell could make them out. There was something oddly distorted about their positions and outlines. He stared. "You'd think they'd been hit by a rock slide!"

"They've been smashed," Ilken agreed. "Smashed up bad!" They exchanged a glance, and she got to her feet, moved over to the gun and slipped into position there. Crowell was tapping out a number on the communicator. After a moment, he said, "Herrick? We're hanging above Station Three. See if you can raise them on Base comm in there. If there's no response, get out here fast with a couple of armed cars!"

## 8

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"Captain Witter," the voice of the Base comm operator said, "the three Galestral people have just arrived. They asked Dr. Bates to show them the bodies, and they're with him now. Mr. Hansen will come out to Station Three with them."

"Thanks," Crowell said. "I'll be waiting."

He switched off his wrist transmitter and glanced down the slope at Station Three. The smashed entry door was visible at this angle; and though he was upwind of the Station now, the stench of death still seemed to be in his nostrils. A shadow drifted over the rocks, and he looked up at his car moving slowly fifty feet above. It was a flat

platform at present, its canopy collapsed. Ilken was at the gun, and Bill Tabor, one of the Base's car operators, at the controls. Their attention was on the forest at the top of the slope. Two other armed cars hung in the sky a quarter-mile up, scopes scanning the area. Crowell's hand brushed the gun holster on his hip, obeying a half-conscious need to make sure the weapon was there, though by itself it shouldn't be much protection if whatever had ravaged Station Three during the night chose to return.

Fifteen minutes later, the Galestral car settled to the ground farther up the slope. Hansen climbed out first, followed by the three members of the survey team. "I've told them the circumstances about Hays," Hansen said as they approached.

Crowell nodded, looking at the Galestrals. Their Suesvant rifles were slung across their backs; bandoliers crossed their chests. They'd been informed earlier that Frank Farquhar had disappeared and evidently hadn't been in the Station when it was attacked. "We'll show you what it's like in there," Crowell said. "Then we can compare conclusions."

• • •

The three went matter-of-factly about their examination of the interior shambles of Station Three, faces showing sober alertness but almost nothing in the way of emotion. Crowell and Hansen, who had gone over the Station in detail before, looked on. Things had been left as they'd been found, except that the bodies of the four technicians who'd staffed the Station had been removed. Patches of stickily dried blood covered sections of the floor; insect-like

creatures crawled and flew about the patches. The smells of violent death hung in the air.

Apparently, only one killer had come in. Two well-defined footprints showed on the smeared floor of the main room. They weren't unlike the impressions a naked human foot might have left, though larger and proportionately broader. Both were of the same foot—a foot sixteen inches long from the end of the heel to the most advanced of the four thick toe marks, six and a half inches across at the widest point. The kind of foot required to support the giant frame which had raised and swung a great rock, over three hundred pounds at an estimate, to drive the entry door back into the Station. The rock still lay across the door's shattered sections.

Smeared dark patterns of other footprints, very much smaller ones, were visible near the entrance, crossing through the short hall into the main area. They appeared to be those of scavenging animals which had come into the Station later at night, after the killer had left. Furnishings and equipment in the main room were knocked about and smashed. Two heavy-charge shock guns hung untouched on the wall near the entrance.

Ned Brock picked up a packed knapsack from behind an overturned table and placed it on a chair.

"Farquhar's," he commented. He added after a moment, "So he just picked up his Suesvant and walked out...."

In the adjoining instrument room, the picture was much the same. One of the two station chronometers had been shattered. Crowell pointed it out, said, "It's indicating sixteen hours eight minutes Base Time. Which fixes the time of the attack at approximately three hours after nightfall. They were still at work here." He nodded at a handgun on the floor. "That's been identified as Dan Gerson's. Gerson was

the man who was dictating a report into the recorder in this room at the moment of the attack."

Grant Gage asked, "Has the gun been fired?"

"Yes," Crowell said. "We found it with its trigger locked down and its charge expended. There's still a measurable radiation residue in the room. His body was lying a few yards away from it."

"The others were killed in the main room?"

"Two of them were. Ray Cross and Edwin Raines." Crowell nodded at a shattered doorframe across the room. "The fourth, Wilma Howard, died in the sleeping section beyond that door."

Grant said, "Could we hear the recording of the attack?"

The recorder into which Gerson was dictating hadn't been damaged in the violent action in the room and was still running when Crowell, Ilken and Herrick came into the Station in the morning. As a result, they had an audible record of the attack and of the night hours that followed.

The significant section wasn't long. Biologist Gerson's voice was interrupted by the explosively abrupt shattering of the entrance door. He exclaimed something, the words drowned out by snarling roars, human yells, thudding noises. The roars swelled up, ended suddenly with the rest of the racket. Then, after some seconds, came a splintering crash which marked the destruction of the sleeping section door. The beast's snarls rose again, subsided. The last of its victims had died. Vague sounds continued to come from the machine--an intermittent deep rumbling, a wet slapping. Occasionally a piece of equipment crashed. The noises produced unpleasantly vivid impressions of the intruder prowling about, making



a deliberate search for hidden survivors, pausing from time to time to tear at one of the bodies again. At last the Station grew quiet. It had gone.

Crowell shut off the recorder, said, "All four died within less than two minutes. I had the tapes scanned for the rest of the night. There's nothing to indicate that the creature came back to the Station. It broke up the two aircars with rocks, as you saw, and then apparently went away."

He added, "Unless there's something else you want to check here, shall we go outside and try to determine what this means, and what should be done about it?"

. . .

Everything indicated that the attacker was a creature of the type described by Alex Hays. In fact, it could very well have been the one he'd reported seeing and which probably had killed him not many miles from this point. It might have been watching Station Three from concealment for some time. It had known enough, at any rate, to select the entry door as its point of assault.

And it had--must have--some degree of immunity to energy weapons. Crowell said, "I've heard that a number of Galestral's superbeasts can absorb heavy charges without being stopped."

The three nodded. Grant said, "There are species which generate energy blasts for attack or defense. Others developed a corresponding tolerance for them. But nothing's been found on

Kulkoor to explain why this biped should have the ability."

"No," Crowell said. "Of course, we may be finding the explanation before we're done. In any case, the biped does seem to have it. Going by the Galestral animals, could a creature like that stand up against guncar fire?"

Grant shook his head. "Not for a significant length of time--if you could get it to face a guncar."

"That might be a problem," Crowell conceded.

Ned Brock said, "A point that puzzles me is that there's a standard force screen control panel in the Station's entrance hall. The rock couldn't have damaged the door if the Station screen had been on. Why should it have been switched off--particularly when someone had been killed in the area two days before?"

And that was, as a matter of fact, a rather delicate point. Crowell said, "We have no explanation. The outlying stations have instructions to maintain protective screening except when personnel enters or leaves. The rule seems to have been violated here last night."

Grant said after a moment, "The screen can be opened from outside the Station?"

"Yes," Crowell said. "That's a necessary provision. But you have to know the coded key for an individual screen to do it."

Hansen added, "That's only one of several unexplained details. What do you make of Farquhar's interest in the biped and the fact that he wasn't in the Station when the thing showed up?"

"I could make a guess about that," Grant said. "He may already have

been aware there was such a life form around. His immediate response to the information he got from your Base suggests it. And he may have attached some special significance to that life form."

Hansen said dryly, "Meaning he considered it a possible clue to the Kulkoor Mystery?"

"Or the Kulkoor Problem, as the Galestral Company calls it. Yes, he may have. Farquhar wouldn't have asked permission to make Station Three his temporary quarters for any minor reason. I'll carry that farther. The Station's area scanners are turned off. But Farquhar may have been using them before he left. He might have caught a glimpse of the biped prowling about, and gone out after it without telling the Station staff what he'd seen or what he intended. It would be in keeping with the way he preferred to operate--strictly by himself."

Grant added, "We can assume the biped ambushed and killed him before it attacked the Station."

## 9

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Heavy rains had fallen in the area again overnight, and any visible tracks around Station Three had been washed away before morning. But the Galestrals had brought along a device with which they expected to be able to follow both Farquhar's trail and that of the biped. Jill Hastings explained it briefly to Crowell while Ned Brock registered the biped's pattern on it in the main room. "He's screening out all but the strongest readings here and discarding the ones

connected with human beings and nonliving materials," she said. "The biped's scent will be the most definite one left. Once it's registered, it can be picked up again anywhere. So can biped trails then as a class. Farquhar's individual pattern already is on record in the biotracker."

Guy Hansen had been flown back to the Star Union Base meanwhile, to keep an eye on developments in Crowell's continuing absence. There had been a moment of barely perceptible hesitation on the Galestrals' part when Crowell said he would accompany them on foot in their search for Farquhar. But they didn't argue the matter. He'd decided to carry one of the shock guns which had been part of Station Three's defensive equipment. Even for a man of his strength, they were awkwardly heavy weapons; and they had neither the sustained charge of energy guns or much range. But at close quarters their jolt supposedly would put almost anything that walked at least temporarily out of action.

Ned Brock's biotracker picked up Farquhar's trail readily outside the Station entrance. They set off up the slope. Ilken and the Base operator would attempt to accompany the ground party in Crowell's car, keeping close to the forest roof. Half a mile up, the crew of a second guncar was to scan the wider area for indications of anything that might be of significance, while another operator would follow with the Galestral car, his job being chiefly to keep the vehicle aloft and ready for use.

The invisible spoor led to the forest, turned there into a narrow game trail. It was more open under the trees than Crowell had expected. The thick canopies were frequently interlaced, but around the trunks the undergrowth was sparse. There were signs of minor life, small voice sounds near and far, sudden scuttlings, and bursts of whirring flight. The Galestrals moved silently, rather like searching hounds, Crowell thought--Ned Brock in the lead with the biotracker, Crowell

some twenty-five feet behind him and the other two on Crowell's right and left. After a few minutes, Crowell realized this was a formation into which he'd been quietly fitted, and that the purpose of the formation, however much it shifted because of the growth through which they passed, was to ensure that Ned Brock was covered at all times by the Suesvant of one of the others, while he himself remained covered by both. He felt a momentary flush of annoyance at the last, told himself to forget it. Personnel of the Galestral Space Exploration Corps reportedly received a lengthy conditioning among the formidable denizens of their planet's wildlands. His companions had some reason to regard him as an amateur in this business.

Ned Brock checked abruptly, slid the tracking device into a pocket. Crowell, stopping almost as abruptly, brought up the shock gun. Grant and the girl were immobile. A wide thicket of denser growth lay ahead and to the left, some forty feet away, a matted gray-green tangle, sodden from the rains. Crowell watched it, wondering what they had noticed. Ned had raised his Suesvant, and Jill was drawing off to the left, edging in toward the thicket. She stopped; and Ned was in motion, closing up on the growth from the right, while Grant came past Crowell. Crowell had a momentary impulse to join that stealthy advance, and again told himself to forget it; they were moving with absolute stillness, in a manner beyond his ability here--if he stirred, he might spoil their game. And if something did break from the thicket, he could get into the action from where he stood.

Moist coolness touched the back of his neck. Wind shift--blowing now toward the thicket. The Galestrals stood still.

Then the tops of the thicket shook; there were crashings inside the vegetation. Crowell had a glimpse of a large chunky body scuttling on four short legs away from the thicket on the far side of Jill. It was followed by another. In moments, both beasts had disappeared in the forest.

Crowell let his breath out with a sigh.

He realized he was drawing approving glances from the Galestrals as they resumed formation; and he felt curiously pleased.

• • •

Some ten minutes later, they found Farquhar's Suesvant rifle. Ned Brock again was leading the way, along an animal trail which followed a small stream. The forest was relatively open here, and Crowell had occasional glimpses of his car moving overhead. Evidently they were registering in the scanners frequently enough to be followed without difficulty. On the far side of the stream a steep bank rose to a height of around twenty to twenty-five feet above them; and Crowell was aware that Grant and Jill were giving the upper edge of the bank a good deal of attention.

Ned said quietly, "Here's where it got him!"

Farquhar's body wasn't there. But that this was in fact the place where he'd been killed became quickly obvious. Rocks had been the biped's weapon again--two large rocks hurled with what must have been remarkable accuracy from the top of the bank beyond the stream. Deep marks in the side of the bank showed where the creature had come sliding down then to finish off Farquhar if he hadn't been killed outright. It had left its footprints in the mud. The Suesvant lay nearby, barrel twisted and action smashed.

Ned cast about with the biotracker, and the story grew clear. Having

drawn Farquhar here and killed him, the biped had gone to Station Three, done its work and returned to this point by another route to pick up Farquhar's body and carry it off.

They set out again. Crowell felt renewed tensions growing in him. The biped might not be far away, though it had been almost ten hours since it passed through here. This seemed to be its territory, they could come on it at any time. Ned lifted the tracker now and then, moved it along the bushes they were passing and checked the readings. Crowell realized he was picking up scent traces left by the biped or Farquhar's body where they had brushed against the growth. Then Ned glanced back, announced, "Open ground ahead!"

The trees thinned out. They emerged on a shallow rocky plateau leading to a wide, rushing stream. Ahead and to the left, on the far side of the stream, rose forested mountain slopes. On the right was a glacier lake, deep cold blue, perhaps two miles across.

"It headed straight for the stream," Ned said.

. . .

And in the stream the trail was lost. The biotracker couldn't pick up scent traces half a day old from a swiftly moving body of water. The car crews had nothing to report. For the next hour, Ned Brock moved up and down both sides of the stream, covered by two car guns. But the tracker's readings showed neither human nor biped traces.

To the west, the stream poured out of a narrow mountain gorge, crowded with luxuriant vegetation. To the east, it emptied into the

quiet lake. "What do you think's happened?" Crowell asked Grant Gage. They were by themselves at the moment, standing at the edge of the stream.

Grant shrugged. "The thing's either followed the water back into the mountains or into the lake. If it wasn't attempting to cover its trail, it may be naturally amphibious. It may have carried Farquhar's body on with it or buried it under rocks in the stream."

"In either case," said Crowell, "we're not very likely to recover the body now."

"No, we're not."

"You'll abandon the search?"

"No," Grant said, "we won't abandon the search."

Crowell was silent a moment, said, "If the particular biped we were following is located and killed eventually, its body may show indications that it's stopped previous radiation charges. That would prove it was in fact a biped which attacked Station Three and probably killed Hays before that. But we can already say as much. What else could be proved by continuing the hunt?"

"I don't know," said Grant. He rubbed his jaw reflectively. "We tried to contact you two days ago."

"I know. I was off-planet and out of communication at the time, getting the swimmer ship rounded up. We managed to do that. I came back early this morning because I'd been told Farquhar was in Station Three. So I went there to talk to him before he'd disappear again."

"Yes, I understand. The reason we were trying to contact you is that we thought ~~we~~ we might have got a clue to the Kulkoor Mystery."



"What was that?" Crowell asked.

Grant told him about the vanished Zuron camera and their speculations. Mountain mists had covered the areas where the big fliers had been observed previously; they hadn't so far been able to kill and examine one. "If it was one of those creatures which broke off the camera, and if it was done deliberately," he said, "we've had, within a few days, demonstrations of calculated hostility against human beings by two different Kulkoor species."

Crowell was frowning. "A biped couldn't have taken the camera?"

"Not unless it was walking on air. Ned went over the surrounding area thoroughly with the biotracker. Whatever took the camera left no trace of itself."

"The biped certainly has given evidence of considerable intelligence," Crowell remarked.

"Yes. Perhaps at the level of the primitive human savage. Perhaps more than that."

"And if your flier is at a similar level of intelligence--"

"Then we seem to have a biologically unstable situation on Kulkoor," Grant said. "One of the two should be the planet's dominant species by now--and a relatively and obviously numerous one. The other should be extinct, or nearly so. Particularly here, where the fertile land forms something like a linked chain of large islands around the equatorial zone, surrounded by desert. There's no room for two competing intelligent species, unless there's something like an instinctive alliance or truce between them."

"As I understand there was among some of the more advanced

native life forms on Galestral," Crowell said.

"Something like that. On Galestral it was hardly a truce since they preyed on one another. But they did maintain a balance and apparently had been doing it for a very long time. And they united against the human intruder."

"You think that might be happening here?"

"It could explain what's happened so far," Grant said. "Kulkoor's intelligent life may be trying to frighten us off, get rid of us, without revealing too much about itself."

Crowell said slowly, "If that's the case, it could delay large-scale operations for quite a while."

"Yes, it could," Grant said. "Here's how the situation will look to the Galestral Company. Before we left the ship, we sent off a drone to report Farquhar's disappearance and the general circumstances under which it occurred. We'll report now that we have evidence of his death. We've told you that we're stationed here as Farquhar's backup team. The fact that he didn't choose to make use of us in his work, and refused to give us any information about it, doesn't change that. We'll pick up where he left off--and, of course, we have new material to work on now. We'll report at regular intervals to the Company, which appears to be as much in the dark about any actual progress made by Farquhar as we are. So long as it seems that we might be able to solve the problem, the Company will wait. If we stop reporting, or if they hear from you that we've failed, they'll make their next move."

Crowell said, "Meaning they'll send out somebody else?"

"Yes. Who'll be sent and what the new group will be equipped to do

is something I can't say."

"By failing you mean that the three of you will have been killed--"

"Yes. Since we don't know what we're up against, that's certainly a possibility."

"How will I know you've failed, and how would I get word to the Galestral Company about it?"

"We'll be in contact with you. If the contact is broken and you're unable to reestablish it, you can assume failure. We'll leave a message drone, set to Company coordinates, at your Base. Tell them as much as you can and dispatch it."

Crowell was silent a moment. "The Base setup is mainly a defensive one," he said then. "But I'd like to take a more active part in this. I'll have this general area and the one around the mining campsite kept under aerial surveillance. Can you think of anything else?"

"Not at present," Grant told him. "We'll be trying to find the biped, and a small hunting party is more likely to be successful in that than a large one. We don't want to drive the thing into hiding."

"Yes, I see." Crowell felt dissatisfied.

Grant added, "The dangers of the situation aren't all here, of course. Kulkoor has become too valuable a prize. If the matter isn't cleared up quickly, there'll be new suspicions raised."

"No doubt there will be," Crowell agreed. "But there's no reason so far to start thinking in terms of a superbeast that might have been imported from Galestral."

"Not yet," said Grant. "There's no Galestral superbeast that matches

the description of the biped. But that could be difficult to prove."

"Are there any that could account for the missing camera?"

"Several." Grant hesitated. "Captain Witter, we're aware that though you represent Cencom here, you haven't always found yourself in accord with Cencom's policies."

Crowell smiled briefly. "Lieutenant Tegeler told me your sick bay is equipped with a very effective truth drug."

"Yes, it's a dependable one. We're Galestral Company shareholders and we work for the Company. But that also doesn't mean that we'd necessarily be in agreement with specific Company policies—or informed of them."

Crowell nodded. "Not when the stakes are large enough. I realize that. We'd better not tie ourselves down to any one theory...."

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"And now," Ned Brock said as the survey team's car started back to their ship, "what will be the procedure? If the thing wanted to lose trackers, it picked a good place for it. It could go upstream or down. If it's at home in the water, the lake was less than half a mile away. If it likes the rocks, it had the mountains right there. Trying to pick up its trail again could turn into a long chore."

"So we won't try to pick up its trail," said Grant. "It was first seen in daylight—it's diurnal when it feels like it. When we get back, let's look around by car generally. We still might get a glimpse of the thing or

another of its kind today. If we don't, we'll change tactics. Judging by what we know of it now, this is a creature which waits and watches quietly until it has the advantage. Then it goes in to kill. It doesn't bluster or bluff."

Ned said, "I see... and we know its general territory."

"And that it hates aircars," Jill added. She nodded. "If we make a nuisance of ourselves around the territory long enough, it should start looking for an opportunity to get to us."

They sent a drone report to the Galestral Company from the ship, returned to the Star Union Base with another drone for Crowell's use, if required, and, by mid-afternoon of the planet day, were back above the stream where the trail had been lost. They moved downstream and on along the fringes of the lake. For the most part, the lake walls were steep and rocky, but here and there forest growth spread to the water's edge. They saw assorted forms of animal life but nothing resembling a great brown biped.

Presently they came back, moved up the stream past the point where the biped's trail had entered the water. A mile on, the stream cascaded out of a deep narrow gorge in the mountain. The car slipped into the gorge. Luxuriant vegetation crowded the walls on both sides. Spray misted the air. There were endless hiding places here for even quite large creatures, and a man on foot would find difficult going. They lifted out of the gorge finally. The car circled above the area enclosing Station Three, the stream, the flanks of the mountains.

"All right, let's start being obnoxious," Grant said. "We'll be thorough about it! Then we'll give the thing--or things--an opening."

They went on shift from then on, one handling the car, one watching

the scanners, one sleeping or resting. The car drifted about, almost aimlessly. It floated along open ground, hung close above the tops of trees, sometimes nosed in below the forest canopy for a few hundred yards. Repeatedly it visited the gorge, the edge of the lake, circled slowly about Station Three. Now and then they saw a Star Union aircar moving through the sky above them.

The day wore on.

## 10

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"What are you going to do?" Ilken asked Crowell.

He grunted. "Assume the worst."

"Why?"

"The thing smells. The picture's wrong! I don't like coincidences."

Her pale eyes studied him. "You don't think Farquhar's dead?"

"Oh, he's dead," Crowell said sourly. "That part--but I'd like to know why he's dead!" He added, "Something's being wound up tight here. I want to have all the room possible to move in when it's set off."

"You haven't got much of a story yet to sell the people."

"I'll sell them on it."

Crowell had Station Three sealed, its force screen locked from

without, before returning to the Star Union Base. On the Base, he called the department heads to a meeting in Dr. Sutton's office.

They came eagerly, anxious to learn the details of what had occurred.

Crowell told them. It had been shown that an intelligent, dangerous life form existed on Kulkoor. Within three days, six human beings had been killed, apparently by a single specimen which had planned its attacks carefully and had demonstrated at least partial immunity to portable energy weapons.

"So far, we can't say what other qualities it has," he said. "The Galestral survey team is at present attempting to locate the biped which attacked Station Three and kill it for analysis. They're better equipped for that job than we are."

"In what way?" said one of the men.

"They have a sophisticated tracking instrument. They've been trained to hunt the most dangerous kinds of game known. And I believe most of you are aware that the Suesvant rifles they use as personal weapons were designed specifically to deal with superbeasts."

There was an uneasy stir. Dr. Sutton said, "You're not implying that this biped animal--dangerous as it evidently is--can be classed with some of the Galestral monsters?"

"No, I'm not implying it," Crowell said. "But until we know how it's to be classed, we'll act as if there were a species of superbeasts confronting us on Kulkoor. That involves giving the Galestral team all the support we can--chiefly by getting our guncars freed for action. It involves further putting this Base immediately on emergency status. The work parties operating off-Base today already are being

recalled, and I want each of you to see to it at once that the outlying stations connected with your departments are closed down and the personnel returned to the Base before nightfall."

There were startled protests. Important work was being carried on in the stations. Much of it couldn't be transferred to the Base. Vital projects would be ruined if they didn't get continuous direct attention. So drastic a measure hardly seemed indicated--the stations were well-protected structures and the personnel now had been alerted to the possibility of danger.

Crowell listened briefly before he said, "Gentlemen, please keep one thing in mind! This Base--the entire Kulkoor Expedition--is itself an experimental Cencom project. Your scientific work is of great importance. I'd be the last to deny it. But the primary purpose of the Cencom project is to determine whether operations on Kulkoor can be carried out through semi-open bases such as this. It's by far the most economical approach. But you wouldn't be here now if there hadn't already been some question as to whether it's possible. You're drawing risk pay with good reason. Cencom wants to see if something's going to happen to you. If something does, it will be necessary to consider other methods."

"We're quite aware of being technically expendable, Captain Witter," Dr. Sutton said stiffly.

"Fine," Crowell said. "And if that turns out to be more than a technicality, I'm here, among other things, to try to keep casualties to a minimum. That again must override other considerations. It's quite possible that the next few days will bring proof that the biped is not an abnormally dangerous creature and that standard precautions will be all that's necessary to prevent a recurrence of what happened last night at Station Three. In that case, the stations will be reopened and the general work program resumed. But at present you'll regard



yourselves as part of a defensive military operation. I'll allow no deviations from it. Anyone who refuses to go along will be frozen and sent back to Cencom on the next supply ship."

Dr. Sutton said, "We'll have to follow your instructions. But you show more confidence in the Galestrals than some of us feel. I think that's an aspect of the matter that requires further discussion."

Crowell nodded. "I agree. There'll be another meeting later in the day at which it will be discussed. We'll assemble again after you've carried out your orders."

. . .

Herrick already had put the Base on alert status. The defense screens were closed, guards stationed at the locks. The rotary gun towers which could sweep the surrounding area with devastating thoroughness were manned. A majority of Dr. Sutton's scientists might remain unhappy about the interruption of pet projects, but Crowell didn't much care. He dispatched a message drone to Administrator Ogilvy on Cencom, to report what had happened, what he was doing and intended to do, then checked to make sure the evacuation of the stations had begun and would be completed before dark. The departments evidently were cooperating, though grudgingly. The experimental ranch animals could shift for themselves in the enclosed areas set up for them for as much as several weeks.

Crowell said to Ilken, "Let's pay a call on Betheny."

"About the swimmer bunch that's on Kulkoor somewhere?" Ilken said.

"Yes. Now we've knocked out the ship, I'm less concerned about them. But I'd sooner have them out of the way."

"I can't see Betheny obliging you about that," Ilken said.

She was right. Betheny said, not too pleasantly, that she didn't know what Crowell was talking about.

Crowell shrugged. "You've been told what's going on," he said. "It's a situation that could work to the advantage of the Swimmer League as much as to Cencom's. Why not take your chances on it? Your men on Kulkoor can't do you much good now. I'll bring your transmitter here, and you can contact them and tell them to come in peaceably. There's no point in trying to fake up a menace on the planet when we seem to have one on hand that's real."

"As to that," said Betheny, "I may have a great deal to say presently. But not now, and not to you."

"You'll get your chance to do all the talking you want to in the next few hours," Crowell told her.

They left Betheny's null-g installation, went to Herrick's office. Herrick looked around from his desk as Crowell drew the door shut behind them.

"Herrick," Crowell said, "how many of our personnel would be required to maintain and, if necessary, fight the Base?"

Herrick didn't blink an eye. "Forty-eight," he said. "I've listed their names."

• • •

Captain Bymer's voice said from the communicator, "A total evacuation of the Kulkoor Base would, of course, require the services of a supply ship. The next one due--"

Crowell interrupted. "I'm talking about an emergency evacuation of personnel only. Some two thirds or possibly all of them. How long would it take you to shuttle between a hundred and a hundred and fifty people up to the sentinel and start feeding them into the freezers?"

There was a moment's silence.

"Perhaps four hours, once preparations for it have been made," Bymer said then.

"How much time do you need for the preparations?"

"That's a seventy-five-hour process, Captain Witter."

"How about cutting it to twenty hours?"

"A technical impossibility! We'd overload the standard life support systems and paralyze the ship."

"All right," Crowell said. "How much *can* you shave from those seventy-five hours?"

Another pause, a longer one, before Bymer's voice told him, "Conceivably the period might be reduced to forty hours before

commencing to load. I can't recommend that unless there is a valid and pressing emergency."

Crowell looked at his watch, said, "I don't know that there'll be an emergency. But start preparations now, on the forty-hour schedule--and don't consider it a drill! As far as the Base is concerned, that's what it will be at present."

"For the record, Captain Witter," Bymer said, "these instructions have been given me under Cencom Seal?"

"They have."

• • •

There were startled expressions when Betheny of Varien, in the saddle of a null-g bubble and escorted by Crowell and Ilken, came into Dr. Sutton's office to attend the second meeting of the expedition's leaders.

Crowell said, "The Public Servant remains under security arrest. But a number of you have indicated that, as the representative of the Swimmer League on Kulkoor, she should have the opportunity to express her opinion on the current situation. That seems reasonable. Dr. Sutton, at the end of our previous meeting you mentioned that there were aspects connected with the Galestral survey team which needed further discussion. Would you care to develop that thought now?"

"Yes," Dr. Sutton said. "I was referring to the fact that you seemed to

place complete trust in the motivations of the Galestral Company as far as Kulkoor is concerned."

Several people began to speak at once, but Betheny's voice cut coolly through those of the others. "We certainly must consider the possibility," she said, "that the murder of Star Union people is in fact part of a continuing Galestral plan to mystify and discourage Cencom until Galestral is left in effective control of Kulkoor."

It crystallized what had been the essence of a number of rumors on the Base that day. Crowell asked Dr. Sutton, "Is that what you had in mind?"

Dr. Sutton glanced uncertainly at Betheny. "I wouldn't have put it in so definite a manner," he said. "But--yes. I feel it is at least a possibility which must be taken into account now in what we plan and do."

"Let me tell you, Captain Witter," Betheny said, "what Dr. Sutton and I and a good many other people in this room and on this Base really think. It's that the Galestral Farquhar's purpose in joining the staff at Station Three last night was not necessarily the hunting of a killer beast as he implied.

"He may as easily have directed the beast to attack our personnel and concealed himself, pretending to be one of its victims, in order to strengthen the effect of the occurrence on us, and through us on Cencom."

Complete silence for a moment. Crowell said thoughtfully, "A domesticated superbeast, imported to Kulkoor by the Galestrals, eh?"

Betheny said, "Let Dr. Freemont tell you whether that would be impossible."

The zoologist looked startled. Crowell said, "Let's assume it isn't impossible. What I'd like to ask Dr. Freemont is whether he knows of a Galestral superbeast resembling in the least the giant biped described by Alex Hays."

Dr. Freemont shook his head. "No--but, of course, only a relative handful of Star Union scientists has had an opportunity to study Galestral fauna at firsthand. Most of the information we have about it was supplied by the Galestrals themselves."

"Precisely. And note, please," Betheny said to the group at large, "that it would make no real difference if Captain Witter's Galestral friends could show us what they say is Farquhar's body or an executed biped. Nobody here knows what Farquhar looks like. The staff of Station Three, who could tell us, are dead. And Galestral could afford the loss of one of its monster pets to throw us off guard."

Crowell said mildly, "It will be only a matter of a few days before our newly installed surveillance equipment is operational again. If what happened at Station Three last night was part of a larger Galestral plot--in other words, if there are Galestral men, equipment, or superbeasts, in significant numbers on Kulkoor--the fact should soon become apparent. Mr. Hansen can assure you this. And if only one superbeast was smuggled in to commit a few murders, it's difficult to see much sense to it. We might already be able to state what the facts are if the surveillance equipment hadn't been sabotaged."

Eyes shifted questioningly again to Betheny. She smiled. "Let's not be naive," she said. "Major political goals are involved here. The Swimmer League has good reason to regard Captain Witter and his Mailliard assistant as unscrupulous enemies. They are, incidentally, no longer attached to the Ragnor Rangers. They're mercenaries. Cencom hired them to act against League interests on Kulkoor. But their loyalty even to Cencom can't be taken for granted. The Galestral

Company is a liberal paymaster. I believe we should regard Captain Witter's willingness to work hand in hand with the so-called Galestral survey team in solving the problem of what happened at Station Three with some skepticism. I believe also we might be safer here today if he and Lieutenant Tegeler had in fact been eliminated."

Crowell shrugged. "It's true that Lieutenant Tegeler and I retain our Ranger rank only by Cencom's courtesy, and that we're now independent specialists who were hired by Cencom to do a job on Kulkoor," he acknowledged. "I don't mind admitting that we're being paid highly to do it, and I have no strong personal objection to being called a mercenary because of that. As to whether we're also in Galestral's pay, there's obviously no point in denying such an accusation. If we were Galestral agents, we'd hardly admit it."

Betheny, he thought, had now shot her bolt. She had, in fact, done approximately what he'd brought her to the meeting to do. And there was a momentary flicker in her eyes as he spoke which indicated she'd begun to suspect it.

"Let's look instead at the wider implications here," he went on. "There may be something on Kulkoor, whether it's Galestral superbeasts or a Kulkoor phenomenon, from which we have no real protection unless we remain behind energy screens. At the moment, we're simply trying to find out whether that's true. It's quite possible that in a day or two we may be able to establish that it isn't true.

"But if it is true, we're as useless on a base of this kind, as far as any actual utilization of the planet goes, as if we were lying in our sentinel ship's personnel freezer. Cencom won't consider ferrying in vast numbers of ground fighters to develop and maintain a foothold on this planet. Many of you must be aware of the enormous expense of the limited Ragnor Campaign. You'll realize that when it comes to Kulkoor, the logistics problems would be prohibitive. That's aside

from the fact that the Star Union simply doesn't have enough ground fighters on hand to deal with either an invasion force of Galestrals or some local superfauna.

"What Cencom would be forced to do is to resort to the dome system on Kulkoor. Expensive enough in itself but feasible. The domes, of course, for reasons of efficiency, would be the newest class of null-g domes, swimmer staffed. Our job is now to find out whether that's necessary. If the biped type of creature turns out to be a minor menace, one that can be handled within the present framework of operations, it won't be necessary."

He concluded, "So regardless of inconveniences and the disruption of projects it involves, I'm asking for your full cooperation these next few days to help determine what the nature of the problem is and to find a means of dealing with it."

## 11

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Through the evening and the moonless Kulkoor night, the Galestrals' aircar had continued to prowl. Its searchlight fingered the ground here and there, held sometimes on startled beast shapes staring up at unaccustomed brightness.

Toward morning, the car became almost stationary, drifting slowly back and forth along a rocky slope, rarely more than twenty feet from the ground. They'd made it clear, very clear, that they were in the area. It had been impossible to remain unaware of them. And now, if there was something around that resented their presence, had been



watching from cover with anger and suspicion, it was time to give the watcher an opportunity to put an end to the nuisance.

The car lifted, floated over the crest of the slope, dropped into a grassy valley behind it.

They'd selected their site at first light an hour ago--the open bowl of the valley. On the far side was a broad belt of forest; and beyond the forest was the area into which they'd followed the biped the day before, the stream where its trail had ended between mountain and lake. On this side rose overhanging cliffs.

The aircar stood in the approximate center of the valley. It was their primary bait. Jill Hastings leaned against a slanted rock beneath the massive overhang, Suesvant resting on the rock and pointed into the valley through the foliage of a lopped-off tree branch which concealed her. She was secondary bait and hunter both. The Suesvant controlled the valley bowl. If the thing they hunted came to investigate the aircar, it would have to move out of cover. They expected the car to draw it from hiding, though perhaps not for some hours. If it had been watching, it knew where they'd descended.

It might suspect the humans weren't in the grounded aircar but somewhere nearby. So it might stalk about the wooded fringes of the valley, searching first for them. Jill's view to left and right was limited by the curve of the cliff; but those approaches were covered respectively by the Suesvants of Grant and Ned, sitting in trees. She was in danger only if the biped could do what none of the great beasts of Galestral could--absorb all the varied forms of violent death the Suesvant could spit out in fractions of a second, and still keep coming. They didn't believe it could. And if it could, then Grant and Ned, each dependent now only on his own senses to warn him of the creature's approach through the forest growth, were taking a greater risk than she.

So: a trap, doubly baited, with a good probability that in one way or the other, it would be sprung. The rest was a matter of waiting. The biped had shown it was good at the waiting game. So were they.

The minutes crept along. The morning brightened slowly, darkened again as black rain clouds massed overhead. There was a sudden heavy downpour, intermittent spatterings thereafter. Thunder rumbled along the mountains. Jill's gaze moved methodically along the far sides of the valley. Now and then she used the gun scope to study some area in magnified detail. Considerable animal life was astir; between rainfalls the air seemed full of small voices. Occasionally she saw more sizable creatures in the valley and along the forest's edge. Two long-legged striped brutes prowled about the car for several minutes, studying it with silent suspicion from every angle before moving off.

She had a clump of bushes directly across the valley from her in the scope when, quite suddenly, she was looking at a head. That was all she could see of the creature; the head had been raised cautiously out of the vegetation to peer into the valley. It was a big dark head with a short muzzle, silvery eyes, pointed black ears. A shivering went down her back. Anything with a head that size was too heavy to be supported by the undergrowth. The creature was standing on the ground... and it stood well above the height of a man.

That section of the forest's edge was out of the others' range of vision. Jill pressed the alert button on her wrist transmitter. Immediately her skin tingled twice under the transmitter band. All right--the men were informed....

Now, patience. She could fire at the head, but if it didn't belong to what she was almost certain it belonged, that would spoil the whole plan. She made a minute adjustment to the Suesvant's sight. Ready,

now.

The head sank back into the growth and disappeared. Jill lifted her eyes above the scope, waited. A minute passed, another. Then something moved slowly into view under the trees, a hundred feet from the place where she'd seen the head. At once, she had it back in the scope--and that was it. The biped. The Kulkoor Beast. Bulky overall build; weight perhaps approaching a quarter of a ton. Black-brown color with moss-green markings. The animal head--nothing humanoid or apelike about that head--was set on a short thick neck. Oddly irregular ridgings, like deformities, on the great chest....

And while all this was registering, there was the slow, growing pressure of her finger on the trigger, cross-hairs centered on the thing's ridged upper torso. Then a great whip cracked, and the Suesvant had struck across the valley. Confined, the tremendous recoil would have lifted Jill from the rock, flung her back against the cliff with bone-breaking force. But the mechanisms dispersed it; what she felt, half consciously, was a momentary push on the shoulder. As the biped staggered back--only staggered back?--she placed a second bullet a dozen inches below the first, a third one below that. By then, the creature was turning sideways, stumbling, jaws stretched open; and she pumped a fourth shot at the head. An explosive, that one; there was a spout of white fire as it struck. Then the biped was out of sight in the vegetation.

"It went down," she announced unsteadily, fingers automatically flicking four new shells into the chamber. "Can't see it now. Hit it four times, but--"

"Just where was it?" Grant's voice from the transmitter.

Jill described the location. The Suesvant was pointed across the rock again, and her eyes kept scanning the forest. So far, the bipeds

had appeared to be solitary hunters. But the maneuvers with the aircar might have drawn more than one to the area. However, nothing seemed to be stirring. The four reports had brought an outburst of startled animal sounds from the valley. That was fading now.

Jill concluded, "That creature is unbelievable! The first two penetrants only seemed to jolt it. It was the third one that started it down."

Silence for a moment. Grant said, "No signs of activity now?"

"None."

"We'll come down. Ned?"

"On my way," said Ned Brock.

Jill waited. Several minutes passed. Then Grant's voice told her, "We're in the open, Jill. Come on out."

She saw them as she walked out from under the overhang. They were moving down into the valley from either side. She pointed to the place where the biped had disappeared, and they angled toward it, Suesvants held ready. Jill went on as far as the aircar, waited there. Ned and Grant joined up, edged into the undergrowth and were gone from sight. After some seconds, Ned's voice said, "Jill?"

"Yes?"

"You hit it all right. Heavy blood spoor.... But it didn't stay down. It's gone."

She said incredulously, "The explosive took it in the head--I saw it! It wasn't hauled off by others?"

"One set of tracks," his voice said. "Only one. But it may not get far. We'll follow. You get in the car and cut across the forest. Find out if Witter's got a guncar in the area that might help intercept."

She took a last look around, swung into the car and ripped it up out of the valley. She felt heavy with disappointment and apprehension. To be tracking something that had picked itself up off the ground after being hammered by a Suesvant wasn't pleasant work in forest growth! But the bipeds weren't invulnerable; she'd proved that much. As for herself, she'd be waiting with the car between forest and stream, to catch it in the open if it tried to retreat along its former route. It seemed reasonable to expect it would do that, if its strength didn't ebb out before it got that far.

She turned on the communicator, signaled the Star Union Base, and asked to be connected with Crowell.

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The biped didn't appear in the open.

It vanished in the forest. The blood trail led to a narrow creek, deep and swift-moving. There it ended. They couldn't have been many minutes behind it, and if it had turned upstream, Ned's biotracker should have registered traces of its blood in the water. There were no such traces; so they checked both banks, then turned down the creek, again working back and forth across it to search both banks for an emerging spoor. There was none. Their previous experience in tracking the creature indicated it might be an expert swimmer, and

there were deep pools in the creek, too deep to be probed visually in the dim forest light, and possibly caves under the rocky banks into which it could have withdrawn. But, again, there should have been traces of blood and scent in the water at such places, and the tracker registered none.

It was awkward time-consuming work. But eventually they came to the point where the forest ended and the creek ran into the stream which led down to the lake. Jill had long since been waiting there, the car hovering above a shallow section of the creek where the biped couldn't have passed without being seen by her. Three hundred feet away, Crowell's guncar, crewed by Crowell and Ilken, hung in the air.

The cars came down. Grant and Ned reported their experience. It remained unexplained. They hadn't passed overhanging tree branches strong enough to let so large a creature clamber up out of the water without touching the banks. "My best guess is," said Ned finally, "that it holed up in some deep tunnel under the creek banks--up above the waterline. Then the creek could have carried away any indications of it before we got that far." He looked at Crowell. "The main point, aside from knowing that the things can be hurt and brought down, is that the biped Jill wounded isn't the one that broke into Station Three and carried off Farquhar. The tracker shows they were of the same species but distinct individuals."

Crowell said, "So there should be at least one living biped still in the area?"

"That's what we think," Grant said. "And if the wounded one doesn't die, it isn't going to stay holed up indefinitely. Our trick isn't likely to work again around here, so we'll pull out for the rest of the day to let things settle down. We'll come back early in the morning and start working through the forest on foot. If we don't hit fresh spoor, there should be old trails the tracker can pick up, and under the trees they'll

be less washed out by the rain. They might lead us to where one of the bipeds is hiding out, or draw another attack."

Crowell nodded. "By morning I can have most of the Base's guncars cleared of other duties and stationed around this part of the country. They'll keep watch on the open areas."

They discussed it further. A joint operation could be successful now. If the biotracker indicated points where a biped might be holed up, the heavy energy beams of the guncars could blast through forest cover, soil and rock, to force the creature to view. With luck, they'd have their specimen tomorrow.

They got back into the cars and left. Crowell was having the stations cleared systematically of records and other significant and movable project material during the day, for storage or use on the Base. The survey team would return to its ship.

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The Galestral aircar was still an hour's flight away from the ship when it signaled an alert from the ship computer. Something that wasn't a recorded species of the local fauna was skirting the ship's defense perimeter. "Better check!" said Grant quickly.

Jill slid into her seat at the communicator console. The alert was no longer being indicated. She cut in a report order, said after a moment, "Unidentified Disturbance.... Now it's recording again...."

Ned said, "Some of Captain Witter's planetbound swimmer friends?"

We might be on their schedule."

It seemed the most likely explanation, but it remained puzzling. The ship scanners could identify an aircar almost as far as they could sense one. But the report tape kept reiterating that the disturbance was of unidentifiable nature. They had the impression of something moving about the defense zone, touching it and withdrawing again. The alert indicator went on and off.

Then, perhaps five minutes later, the tape registered a brief blast of ship armament. After that, there were no more alerts, and the report tape showed Condition Normal.

Ned shook his head. "Wouldn't stay warned off! We may never know who it was."

They continued toward the ship at high speed, saw it presently suspended above the plain ahead. The aircar's scanners were in action, but there was nothing to suggest the presence of intruders in the area. Grant took the car several times in a wide circle about the ship, then said, "Check condition, Jill."

Jill said after a moment, "Condition Normal. I'm calling for ultimate sensor scan."

"Good idea."

"Condition Normal," Jill said presently again. "If there was something around, it isn't around now, Grant."

"If there was something around?"

"Systems failures aren't unheard of."

"No," Grant acknowledged. "But they haven't happened to us before."



"And it wouldn't be the best time for problems of that kind to develop." He turned the car in toward the ship. "Well, we'll soon find out!" He tapped the recognition signal.

"Acknowledged," Jill said.

The aircar drove on another three hundred yards toward the ship.

And a glare of brilliant blue light suddenly appeared about the ship, englobing it—its projected defense screens.

Grant whipped the car about, almost end for end, sped back from the defense perimeter. The light winked out.

"Unidentified Disturbance!" Jill read from the report tape, an instant later. "That was us!"

"Must have been." Systems failure? The faces of all three had paled. At normal approach speed, they should have triggered ship armament. Grant said, "Let's repeat the procedure...."

They did. The results were the same. The ship recognized the aircar's signal, but prepared to attack when the car came up to the defense perimeter. For the computer mind in there, they remained an Unidentified Disturbance.

"See if you can find out what the problem is," Grant said.

Jill shook her head, ran through the standard checks twice. "As far as I can tell from here, there is no problem," she said then. She thought a moment, added, "Let's try riding in on continuous recognition signal. If it's forced to keep acknowledging, that may cancel its alerting sequence."

They moved in slowly. The defense screens came on. Jill said, "At

this point, it refuses to acknowledge. The sequences do cancel each other! Pull back and try again, Grant."

On the fifth attempt it worked. The defense screens remained off, and the ship continued to acknowledge the aircar's approach as a non-hostile one. Grant checked the car on the safe side of the attack zone, said, voice absent, "Continue standard procedure!"

Jill cut the recognition signal. The ship stopped acknowledging. Nothing else happened. She gave the "Lock Open" order, said, "It confirms." Her voice was a little shaky.

Grant nodded, said, "Lock's opening! Well, hold your breath, people! Everything looks all right, and we can't expect it to give us a direct invitation."

He edged into the attack zone, turned the car toward the open lock.

## 12

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The Star Union Base looked almost normal that night. Many of the sections remained lit after the official work period had been over for some hours. Round-the-clock operations were nothing unusual, and Dr. Sutton had told the department heads to set up new schedules to keep the people who'd been withdrawn from the stations and other outposts usefully occupied.

In the recreation area Crowell noted considerable serious drinking going on. He wasn't surprised. For more than two thirds of the

expedition's members, the surface of any planet remained starkly alien territory. They were norm-g walkers, had been trained for the work they were doing, but they'd been born and raised in enclosures. Vast enclosures sometimes, but always and obviously limited. Under the open sky, consciously or not, they felt exposed.

Cencom, Crowell thought, had put the expedition force together precisely with that in mind. It was testing Kulkoor. Not with seasoned planeteers, because there weren't enough seasoned planeteers in the Star Union to man the major operations planned here. It was testing Kulkoor with the approximate level of walker manpower it would have available for planetwide mining work. And if it seemed that level of manpower couldn't take whatever strains Kulkoor might impose, Cencom would resort, however reluctantly, to the use of swimmer domes. The move would involve major concessions to the Swimmer League, but Cencom would pay the price to retain overall control of the Kulkoor operations.

Meanwhile he'd have a growing case of general nerves on his hands if it couldn't be quickly proved that the bipeds, at least, weren't more than a containable local problem. He'd let it be known that one of the creatures had been seriously wounded by the Galestral survey team that morning, and that the Base guncars were to take part in a continuing intensive hunt tomorrow. He wasn't sure how much good that information had done. Evacuation of most of the personnel to the sentinel ship's freezer bay, simply to get them out of the way for the time being, might become the best solution. He'd decide on that when he heard from Captain Bymer that preparations for the process had been concluded. It wasn't a solution Cencom would like at this point—they'd prefer to test the expedition to the point of emotional disintegration. But they hadn't specifically told Crowell that; and they'd put him in charge. The decision was his. Cencom would have to buy it.

The morale of the defense team, at any rate, seemed well above norm. As Herrick had put it, they were men trained to fight and they now had at least the illusion that there was something outside the Base to fight. The energy cannons were connected to the defense screen mechanisms, permitting them to fire through the screens in any direction. Search beams swept about in changing patterns, illuminating the landscape beyond the uncertain glimmering of the screens. Technically it was a drill. If it also served to remind the personnel of the Base's formidable armament, so much the better.

Crowell went to his quarters, had been asleep about an hour when the intercom buzzer alerted him. He switched on, acknowledged.

"Captain Witter," said Dr. Bates' voice, "would you come to my office immediately?"

"What's happened?"

"We've had a... well, a disturbance. A case of acute hysteria. There's a chance the hysteria might spread. I think you'd better hear at firsthand what it's about."

"Yes, I'd better do that. I'll be there."

When Crowell arrived with Ilken in Dr. Bates' office, they found Herrick, Hansen and Dr. Sutton already present. Another door opened as they came in, and Dr. Kimberley, Bates' assistant, appeared in it.

"The patient's asleep," Kimberley said. He looked at Crowell. "Under sedation. Of course, she can be aroused again if you want to speak to her."

"I don't at the moment," Crowell said. "Just tell me what's happened."

Dr. Bates said, "The patient is Nancy Watson, a biotechnician. She was a close friend of Wilma Howard, the young woman who was killed in Station Three."

Crowell nodded.

"Nancy has been terribly upset by Wilma's death," Dr. Bates said. "We had her under treatment for a while yesterday, but she wanted to go back to work then, and I let her do it. It seemed good therapy. What I'm trying to emphasize is that she's been under severe emotional stress. Well--a short while ago, she was coming through one of the south area passages."

"Corridor Forty-eight," said Herrick. "It is, or was, almost unlit. There was no one with her."

"All right," Crowell said. "She was coming alone through a dark corridor. And?"

"She thinks she saw ghosts," said Dr. Bates.

Crowell stared at him. "Ghosts?" he repeated. "The ghosts of Wilma Howard and the others killed in Station Three?"

Dr. Bates frowned. "No," he said. "Though that's what one might have expected in the circumstances."

"Then whose ghosts?"

"No one she knew. The ghosts of three men. According to Nancy, they were three of the men who disappeared from that mysterious mining camp."

Crowell grunted. "Did she give any details?"

"Yes," Dr. Bates said. "She said she was coming along the corridor and saw three men standing together, staring in her direction as if waiting for her to come up. She couldn't make them out clearly at first, so she kept walking toward them until she realized suddenly that they weren't people of the Base at all but, in her terms, ghosts--three dead men. She turned, screaming, and ran back the way she'd come."

Herrick said, "I happened to be in the area and heard the commotion. I and some others investigated the corridor at once. There was no one there or in the structures behind it."

"Dr. Bates," Crowell said, "when you called me, you indicated we might be having to deal with more than one case of hysteria."

"I'm afraid that's quite possible," Dr. Bates said.

Hansen said, "Nancy was audible all over that section, Crowell. At least two dozen people heard her directly. What she was screaming about was that the creatures which killed Alex Hays and the staff of Station Three were devils... that this was their world and we shouldn't have come here. And that you'd made the matter worse by letting the Galestrals shoot one of them. So they'd showed her ghosts of earlier victims as a sign they were going to kill all of us now." Hansen shrugged. "We got her quieted as quickly as possible, but I could see she'd been getting reactions from at least some of those who were listening."

Dr. Bates nodded. "Symptoms of agoraphobic disturbance have been frequent here, though so far they haven't significantly affected the efficiency of the expedition. Sleep problems, general tensions... that kind of thing. Usually the patient didn't know what really was bothering him. If the bipeds hadn't appeared, that's all it might have amounted to. But now the pattern will be reinforced by the feeling that

the world around us has become actively hostile. We should expect further trouble and--"

He checked himself as the intercom buzzer sounded. A voice inquired, "Is Captain Witter in the Medical Section?"

Dr. Bates turned to his desk, pressed the intercom button. "Yes, he is."

"We have a message for him from the Public Servant Betheny of Varien. She would like to see him in her quarters as soon as possible. The matter is urgent."

Crowell glanced at Ilken, said, "Witter speaking. Tell the Public Servant I'll be there in a few minutes." Dr. Bates released the response button, and Crowell went on, looking at Dr. Sutton, "I've told Captain Bymer to ready the emergency sections of the ship's personnel freezer for occupancy. Some time early tomorrow, he should be prepared to process large groups through on half an hour's notice. You might let it be known in the departments that those who want to go into freeze on the ship will be able to do it then. That should take off a good deal of pressure. If required, we will, in fact, evacuate all personnel except for the combat and security teams and maintenance crews until things have been straightened out down here."

He added, "Dr. Sutton, I don't like to interfere with your Base projects to that extent, but it seems preferable to taking chances with a general panic."

Dr. Sutton smiled wryly. "I find myself in agreement with you!"

"And, Herrick," Crowell went on, "light up the Base for the rest of the night, except for personal quarters. No more dim corridors or

darkened work areas. Don't overload your men, but you might keep a few patrols circulating."

Herrick nodded, started for the door.

"Guy," Crowell said, "what's the soonest you can get the surveillance equipment back in action?"

Hansen shrugged.

"If I forget about sleeping--day after tomorrow."

. . .

"Captain Witter," said Betheny, "I've decided it can serve no good purpose to continue my attempts to modify Cencom's plans for the Kulkoor operation. I'm abandoning them completely. And I wish to be transferred at once from these quarters to the sentinel ship, to remain there until arrangements can be made to return me to Varien."

The main room of the null-g structure blazed bright with lights. Betheny's two attendants had drifted out through a section exit when Crowell and Ilken came in and took guide rods from the wall of the entrance hall. The two had closed the exit behind them. Betheny wanted this discussion to be private.

Crowell said, "What brought you to that decision?"

"Does it matter?"



"It might matter." He was watching her expression. So, off to one side of the support web, holding her position with a slow fanning motion of the guide rod, was Ilken. "You have a group of followers out there," Crowell remarked, "who haven't received instructions from you for a while."

"What difference could that make?"

"I'm wondering whether one of your instructions to them might have been to launch a strike at the Base at a specified time. The understanding being, of course, that at that time you wouldn't be on the Base."

Betheny's face worked. "They've been given no such instructions!" she said. "Nor are they equipped to carry out a strike against the Base. Since I'm ending the operation here, I'm willing to tell them to come in and surrender. Will that be satisfactory?"

"I couldn't be sure they'd all surrendered, could I?"

She hesitated. "You have your interrogation instrument. It will show you I'm telling the truth. I waive immunity."

"I'll want that on record." Crowell glanced toward Ilken. She nodded, was already in motion, diving toward the entrance hall. After a moment, they heard the entry door close behind her. Crowell looked about the quiet, brilliantly lit area, back at Betheny.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

"Afraid?" She shook her head. "I simply wish to be--"

"You're frightened to death." But he was puzzled. He knew some of Betheny's sympathizers on the Base were still keeping her informed of outside events. It was quite possible she'd already heard of Nancy

Watson's hysterical report of an encounter with ghosts. What seemed unlikely was that Betheny of Varien would allow such a story to drive her off the Base or change her plans in any way--unless she had reason to see some significance in it which wasn't obvious to Crowell.

She said, "Your statement is impertinent, Captain Witter! And you're exceeding your authority."

Crowell shook his head. "If I decide it's in Cencom's interest to keep you on the Base, you stay."

"No!" Betheny said shakily. "I must be transferred to the ship."

"Then give me a reason."

She moved her head from side to side. "My mind tells me the planet beast was here. I know it's impossible. But if I'm forced to remain on the surface of Kulkoor, I'll lose my sanity."

There was a chill for an instant along Crowell's spine. "The planet beast?"

She stared at him. "The creature which killed the people in the Station. Or another like it."

"Just what happened?" Crowell said.

She'd been asleep in her darkened rest section, and had come awake at some sound which she couldn't now describe. It wasn't a loud sound. Then she saw something large near the wall of the section. It was vague, shadowy. But in a general way it was manlike except for its great size. It seemed to be watching her. Then it gradually faded away. For a minute or two after she no longer could see it, she still sensed it nearby, still watching her. She remained too

frightened to move or make a sound. Then, abruptly, she knew it was gone, and called her bodyguard and Dr. Torres. They'd been unaware of any disturbance.

Ilken returned in the middle of the account. Betheny seemed hardly to notice her or the instruments she carried. Crowell got the immunity waiver recorded, let Betheny go on talking, asked occasional questions. Ilken's face remained impassive as she watched the interrogator's readings. Betheny might have had a vivid nightmare, but she was telling Crowell no more than she believed to be true.

He said at last, "All right, you'll get transferred. Now call in your group."

Betheny took the transmitter Ilken handed her, carefully adjusted the settings, turned the switch.

They waited.

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"Did you ever," Crowell asked Ilken, "get a feeling that you're about to discover you're out of your depth?"

"Now and then," Ilken acknowledged. "Is that how you're feeling?"

"I'm not sure." They'd called Dr. Bates to Betheny's quarters, had her and her two attendants drugged and placed in an enclosed null-g carrier of the Medical Section, in which they'd be transferred to the sentinel ship as soon as Captain Bymer's shuttle arrived for them. Bymer then would have the three processed immediately into a

freezer. He believed now he might be able to meet Crowell's forty-hour schedule on evacuation preparations. He'd report on that as soon as all checks had been completed. Crowell hadn't yet told anyone that Betheny's group on Kulkoor, eighteen men, seemed to have disappeared. At least, they'd been given their code signal for fifteen minutes without responding, though the transmitter indicated the signal was being recorded. Betheny had been in near-shock by then.

"You going to start evacuation when Bymer's set for it?" Ilken asked.

"We'll clear out the people we don't need here and who want to go tomorrow, yes. Volunteers can stay--so far, it doesn't seem there'll be many of those!" Crowell scratched his scalp, scowling. "There's simply been nothing concrete enough to justify an overall evacuation. We can't very well let the expedition get run out of Kulkoor by ghosts!"

Ilken observed that ghosts were as good a reason as she could think of to get run out of Kulkoor or any place else. Mailliards had a lively respect for the supernatural. "What about Betheny's men vanishing like that?"

Crowell shrugged. "We don't know they've vanished. We only know that the transmitter didn't raise them. And since she doesn't know where they've been hiding, we can't check on it physically.... Let's go find Herrick, make sure he has the freezer candidates ready to move out in groups as soon as Bymer gives the word and starts running down shuttles for them. Then we'll tighten things up some more, get set for anything we can think of or imagine, and wait for developments."

Later in the night then, about an hour before dawn, there was a development.

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Herrick had left a guard posted at a small side lock in the energy screen. A passing patrol noticed the guard wasn't at his station, and informed Herrick. It was established presently that the man was nowhere on the Base.

The aircars were accounted for, and the overhead aircar lock hadn't been used during the night. Which left two possible ways in which the guard could have left the Base. One, voluntarily or otherwise, was through the disposal unit. The other was through the lock he'd been set to watch. It couldn't be employed as a means of entry until it was released by the tower controls. But a man could cycle out through it. There was no trace of the guard outside, and no tracks showed on the rocky ground surrounding the Base. The sentries in the towers, behind their shifting searchlights, had seen nothing of significance in the area.

"But he might have left that way," Crowell told Grant Gage by communicator. "If he did, he went somewhere. Can you give us a hand with your biotracker?"

"We'll be there as soon as we can," Grant's voice told him. "We were about to start out, as it happens."

"Among the Galestral superbeasts," Crowell went on, "is there something that could affect humans mentally--give them hallucinations, produce irrational behavior, insanity?"

Grant said hesitantly, "A number of those species have been known

to produce mental effects of various kinds in human beings."

"Mental effects that might explain our reported ghostly visitations--or induce a man to walk off the Base at night?"

"It seems possible. The processes aren't well understood."

"What's the defense against that kind of thing?"

"Generally," said Grant, "killing the responsible creature. There are drugs that give partial protection. And some people simply aren't affected." He added, "We've had a problem of our own. Our ship can't be considered wholly dependable at present." He described their difficulties in attempting to come on board the day before. "Jill and I were up half the night trying to determine what's wrong. The trouble is that nothing seems to be wrong. If it hadn't been for that, we'd have been on our way an hour ago. But we'll leave for your Base within the next ten minutes now."

Captain Bymer called to report that processing preparations on the sentinel ship definitely would be completed in not much more than an hour. Herrick had notified the people who were to maintain the Base. Others were being organized into evacuation groups. There were no protests from department heads; and very few expedition members had decided on their own to remain planetside.

Crowell sent off another drone to Cencom, reporting the current state of affairs on Kulkoor.

Captain Bymer's voice said from the communicator, "The reason for the delay is a malfunction in the ship lock to the shuttle launching deck. The lock won't open. Our engineers have been working on it for the past half hour. It can't be too serious a difficulty. I'll call you as soon as a shuttle is ready to start down."

"We'll wait for the call," Crowell said.

He turned off the communicator, grimaced at Ilken. "Let's say nothing about that at present. They're edgy enough here!"

There was fear on the Base that morning, something that went beyond uneasiness, and was strengthened, if anything, by the fact that no one seemed willing to voice it now. Evacuation personnel were gathered in their various sections. Herrick had designated the sequence in which the groups were to leave. The Base's guncars had been withdrawn to the side of their area to leave room for the shuttles. Defense teams had taken up positions; the locks were under guard. There was nothing to do but wait.

Fifteen minutes passed before another call came from the ship. "Yes?" Crowell said.

Captain Bymer's voice was strained. "I have no explanation for this," he said. "It's just been reported to me that there has been an explosion in the shuttle launch section."

Crowell glanced quickly at Ilken, said, "What's the damage?"

"Captain Witter, we don't know. The shuttle lock remains jammed. But the explosion appears to have been a fairly heavy one. I'm afraid we won't--"

He broke off. There was a spluttering sound in the communicator.

"Captain Bymer?"

"A second explosion," Bymer's voice said thinly. "This one apparently in the engine room. I--"

The communicator went dead.

Crowell and Ilken stared at each other. The shock in her face was replaced quickly by a cold set expression. "Another coincidence?" she said.

"Hardly! But what--"

"Crowell, something got the ship! Something wasn't going to let the Base be evacuated. It'll be after the Base next!"

He nodded. "Come on! We'll get off a drone to Cencom--let them know what they'll be up against when they come back to Kulkoor. May not be much time left--"

As they turned toward the door of the communicator room, there was the thud of explosion. The flooring shook. They ran out the door. Black smoke poured up from the far end of the Base.

Crowell caught Ilken by the arm.

"The drone storage area!" he said harshly. "They've started to show their hand--and now they don't want us to be sending messages to Cencom. Go back--call the Galestrals! Tell them the Base is under attack and they're to lift their ship off the planet while they can!"

Ilken turned back toward the computer room. Light blasted inside it. The shock of the explosion sent her stumbling backward toward



Crowell, arms lifted to shield her face. As he caught and steadied her, screaming began all about the Base.

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Kulkoor flowed by below the survey team's aircar. Flat tableland here, sparkling with pools formed by the recent rains. The mountains were gliding up, great snow-capped ranges enclosing chilled glacier lakes. To the south beyond the mountains lay the area of the Star Union Base.

Jill Hastings' gaze roved ceaselessly, methodically, over what was in view. Her fingers on the scanner scales adjusted magnification automatically. Her thoughts followed their own somber and apprehensive courses, which in no way diminished the effectiveness of her watch. If the scanners should pass over something that called for further attention, she'd be aware of it instantly. That ability was as practiced and reflexive as adjusting the instruments.

They'd dispatched a drone to the Galestral Company just before leaving the ship. It contained the information Crowell had given Grant by communicator, the fact that he had decided on a partial evacuation of the Star Union Base. It contained a detailed report on the unexplained malfunctioning of the team's ship computer. There'd been nothing, absolutely nothing, to show why the ship had failed to recognize their aircar as a non-hostile object after acknowledging their recognition signal. When they'd played back the scanner tapes, there'd again been nothing to explain the ship's use of defensive and offensive armament which they'd recorded previously in the aircar.

They'd moved the ship forty miles to the west then, left it stationed two miles above the ground. They'd entered its new location in the drone message, and the recognition signals by which it might be approached and boarded, with caution. They'd added finally that they were leaving for the Star Union Base to see what they could do there, dispatched the drone, and left.

All that, of course, was in case somebody else would be sent along by the Galestral Company presently to pick up the Kulkoor Problem at the point where they'd failed to solve it.

Failure had begun to seem quite possible.

Jill bent over the ground scanners, shutting the voices of her companions from her mind. Like most of those born on Galestral, she had few illusions about man's absolute superiority in the scheme of things. Their world had been an object lesson. Life was unpredictable; its possible final expressions seemed beyond all estimation. Man was a competitor who had remained in the lists until now. It could not be said safely that he was, or would be, anything else.

It seemed there might be a major competitor on Kulkoor. Was it the biped, the great brown-black ogre of this world, with its appearance of savage cunning and near-indestructibility?

Or something else--something that so far had manifested itself only indirectly?

They came speeding presently down the southern slopes of the mountains. The car crossed the area where they had ambushed the biped, and Jill saw the abandoned structure of Station Three to the left below.

"Grant!" she exclaimed suddenly. "There's somebody down there!"

"What? Where?"

"At the Station. I saw him just a moment... there he is again!" She twisted a dial. Her breath caught sharply.

"What is it?"

Jill, face quite white now, said in a low, strained voice, "Keep moving--but slowly! It can't be, of course... but that's Farquhar standing down there beside the Station. Frank Farquhar!"

"It can't be Farquhar," Grant said. "What is it? Are you having trouble keeping it clear in the viewer?"

"Yes," said Jill. The impossible figure down there seemed to blur slightly from moment to moment, then solidify again. It wasn't a matter of adjusting the scanners; the rocky ground around it remained unblurred.

She heard Ned Brock say, "Looks like somebody's playing ghost.... Same sort of game as last night on the Base?"

"Probably," said Grant. "Let's start down."

Jill looked around at him. "That's what we're supposed to do!"

"Of course it's what we're supposed to do. But this--whatever it is--is Kulkoor showing its face. We'll take a look."

Jill didn't answer, kept her attention on the figure at the Station as the aircar swung about, went gliding down. Ned was at the communicator, signaling the Star Union Base to let Crowell know what they'd come across. Base comm hadn't responded so far.

Something, Jill thought, had seen their car coming back over the mountains on the route they'd taken before. Something that knew it was their car, knew they were connected with Farquhar, knew it was they who had shot down and tried to collect a biped.

So an image of Farquhar had been produced near Station Three. Something knew they would see it, would come to it. It was a trap, but she didn't say that aloud. Grant and Ned knew it, too. And Grant was right; it was necessary to find out what this was.

The thought came again then: that mankind could not expect to win every round, and might already have lost this one.

Grant checked the aircar four hundred yards from the image, fairly close to the ground. To the left, the forest line lifted above the car, not much more than two hundred feet away. Ned had shut off the communicator, was crouched with his Suesvant at the opened car door, attention on the forest. If there were watchers nearby, they should be there. The only place of concealment on the rocky slopes below was the Station; and the Station supposedly had been sealed inside its force screen.

Grant was keeping a more general watch on the area. His hands remained on the car controls, ready to swing the car into full acceleration in any direction. The nose of the car was pointed at Farquhar's image, and Jill's attention was on that, as it showed in the scanners.

It appeared to be there not much more than twenty feet from her. Jill had experienced an increasing sense of revulsion as they moved down toward it from the sky. Most of that feeling was gone now; she was trying to define what this thing, this simulacrum of a dead man, one she'd known slightly in life, might be. It wasn't a perfect likeness; there were minor discrepancies and it didn't have the appearance of

life, might be intended not to have it. There was no motion. The expression was frozen. The eyes seemed blind.

She reported tonelessly, "The figure appears to touch the ground only with one foot. If it had any weight, it should topple over in that position."

"You can't make out anything else about it?"

"Not a thing."

"Ned?"

"Nothing stirring in the shrubbery," Ned said briefly.

"I'll move in closer," said Grant.

Jill sighed softly. They meant to spring the trap. Perhaps it couldn't be avoided. The image, its mere presence, whatever its nature, already had made a number of things joltingly clear.

Her eyes remained on the viewer, but she was aware of the slope starting to move past on the left as the car slid slowly forward. Perhaps a minute passed. The image of Farquhar came steadily closer in the viewer. Suddenly, it vanished.

"It's gone, Grant!"

"I saw." He'd checked the car as Jill spoke. She switched the scanners to a wider view of the slope. They remained silent then, waiting. The disappearance of the image should have some meaning.

There was a sound about them. Not at all loud, but steady. It hung like a shivering in the air, neither grew nor faded.

"You hear that?" Grant asked.

Ned grunted. "You get a feeling that something's pulling at you?"

"Yes. An odd.... Jill?"

Jill didn't reply. Grant swung around in the seat, felt the blood drain from his face, shouted at the top of his lungs: "*Jill!*"

In the seat behind him was a shape. It showed Jill's outlines, but they were a hazy gray, almost smokily unsubstantial. At his shout, the face seemed to turn toward him, her features still faintly discernible. He heard Ned's shocked gasp. Then the shape moved, turned solid, color flowing into it; and she was there again, blinking, startled.

"Grant... what--"

"Just hang on! Stay *here*! Watch her, Ned!" Grant slapped in acceleration, swung the car around in a sharp arc, and upward.

• • •

"You were fading out like a ghost!" he said a minute later, face still white. "What happened to you?"

The car was circling half a mile above the Station and south of it. The image of Farquhar was again in sight down there. Apparently, it became invisible if the viewer moved close enough, reappeared as he withdrew.

Jill shook her head. "I'm not sure! There was a kind of fog. I mean a literal kind of fog. It was getting thicker. I seemed to be moving into it. Your voices began to go away. Then I heard you yell--and I was back."

"Why didn't you do something?"

She shrugged helplessly. "Do what? I wasn't worried. I don't know why. I was aware of what was happening, but it didn't seem very real. More like a dream."

"The trap mechanism," Grant said after a moment. "It almost got you. And if we hadn't seen you going, it should have got us. We were feeling a pull--"

"It fits in with other things," Ned said.

It did. The trails of the two bipeds they'd tracked had appeared to end in water. "They got picked up," Ned said, "by--well, whatever this is!"

Grant nodded. "They can focus the effect on some given spot. The second biped was hurt--he yelled for help, and they lifted him out of the creek just ahead of us." As a man had vanished without trace from the Star Union Base during the night.

"And the ghosts, human and biped, they saw on the Base earlier," Grant went on. "It works both ways. A form of transportation. You fade out here; you fade in there. Hold the effect before you're all the way there, and you'll look like a ghost. As Jill did, sitting here."

"And defense screens are giving Witter's Base no protection at all," Ned added.

"Not a bit," Grant agreed. "Now--what will they do next?"

Jill said soberly, "They must be ready to come in for the kill! They've been trying to scare humans off the planet. They tried it first by pretending to be animals--"

Cunning, savage animals, striking without warning, unharmed by human weapons, vanishing mysteriously when trailed. If the Star Union expedition's losses could be piled up to an intolerable extent, until the survivors fled in panic, humans might decide not to come back to so ferociously inhospitable a world.

"But then Jill shot one of them," Grant said. "Body screens. They'd turn an ordinary energy beam, but the Suesvant punched through. He may have been badly hurt, perhaps dying, when they got him back. That ended the invulnerable superbeast myth--so, last night, they switched to supernatural effects. They'd already set that up by cleaning out the mining camp and letting it stand there to be found."

"If they planned to scare us off the planet, they must have reason to think our minds work pretty much like theirs," said Ned. "There's a civilization here. Underground? In mountain caves?"

Grant said, "Perhaps only while there are humans around. There may not be too many of them, but it has to be a pretty advanced civilization in some respects. Could they have gimmicked our ship yesterday?"

Ned said after a pause, "No need to assume that at present."

Jill said, "I think Farquhar figured it out! He'd been trying to work out a way to communicate with them. That's why he left Station Three. But they don't care about communicating. What do we do now? They saw us coming, set up a trap on the route we've used before. They must know we three had a connection with Farquhar. The trap hasn't



worked, and maybe they already know it hasn't worked."

Ned said, "The Base still isn't responding to our signal."

There was silence for a moment. Jill said, "You're thinking there might be a problem on our ship again? The communicator linkup was operational an hour ago. We can find out quickly by going on to the Base...."

"And you two are going there," Grant said. "We have to let Witter know about this at once, so he can get out the information."

"What about you?" said Jill.

Grant tapped his viewer, said, "There's a machine down there, according to our metal scanners. Check it for yourself, Ned. I have it pinpointed. About a hundred and fifty yards from their Farquhar image. Copper, steel, other items. About eighteen by twelve inches across the top. We'll assume it's the image projector."

"What do you want to do?" Jill asked sharply.

"We'll go down, and I'll get out under cover. Then you two leave for the Base. After you're gone, I'll put a bullet in their machine. That should bring one of them here to find out what's happened. I'll be waiting for him."

"Grant, don't do it!" Jill said. "At least, let's stay together!"

"I'd rather we could stay together. There isn't time. They seem to know almost everything there is to know about us, and we still know next to nothing about them. Anything I learn here may be vital. When I'm in the clear, I'll call you by transmitter. Don't try to contact me before I do. You might give away my position."

"Jill, he's right," Ned said, as she was about to reply.

"I suppose so," Jill agreed forlornly. She didn't add that she had a strong conviction she wouldn't see Grant again.

The car turned down, made a wide, wary circle about the Farquhar image, paused above the forest, then slipped down among the trees. If there were watchers about, the idea was to create the impression the Galestrals were searching the forest for them. The car rose back up through the canopy some minutes later, lifted into the air, and sped off in the direction of the Star Union Base. Grant was no longer in it.

. . .

"Where's Gage?" Crowell asked.

"He's busy," said Ned.

"On your ship?"

"No. Trying to ambush a biped."

Crowell made a snorting sound. "He could do that here!"

"You've been under siege obviously," Ned said.

"We're still under siege," Crowell told him. "There's a lull right now. Five minutes ago we had some action. They'll be back. We've lost something more than forty people here on the Base. It's hard to keep track. And they got to our sentinel ship. A few of them could have

gone up there on the shuttle yesterday. No one would have spotted them."

"What happened?"

"The ship blew up a short while ago. I was talking to Bymer at the time. He reported two preliminary explosions but couldn't give any details."

The Base's guncars were dispersed and grounded in the installation's central open square. The guns were manned. Ned saw Ilken at one of them. She gave no notice to him or to Jill, still in the Galestral car which hovered beside Crowell and Ned. Her eyes shifted about in quick, flicking glances; her hands stayed on the handles of the gun. Several dozen men, armed with a variety of weapons ranging from energy handguns to semi-portables, were stationed along the edges of the square. Some six or seven held shock guns, as did Crowell.

The rest of the Star Union personnel was present but not armed. They were scattered about the square between the guncars, sitting down, singly or in small groups. Some lay facedown, but Ned saw none that looked injured. There was hardly any movement.

"How did you lose your people?" he said.

Crowell jerked his head at the nearest building.

"Around a dozen are lying behind that," he said. "What's left of them. We didn't get them out here in time. They were blasted with some kind of fire. The crew in the south tower saw the biped that did it. They cut loose on him, knocked in the side of the building. But he'd simply disappeared.... And the rest of the people we've lost have also disappeared. There's a kind of sound--"

"We've heard it," said Ned. "They nearly got Jill that way."

"You look around, and another three or four seem to be gone, eh? Fade out.... Well, we've fixed that--probably!"

"How?"

"Figured the sound might have something to do with the fading," Crowell said. "When it starts now, we cut in with the siren. Haven't lost anyone since. This defense arrangement"--he indicated the area around them--"is to stall their other approach. We've got everybody out here, covered by the guns. The guns cover one another. When the things start to materialize in the air, they get chopped with a short-beam blast and vanish again. They don't get time to use their weapons."

"They haven't tried materializing elsewhere on the Base and attacking from there?" Ned asked.

"Not after the first time. We got three as they came out. Killed them, I think; but the bodies had faded along with their weapons before we could reach them. They could try it again, but apparently they don't intend to get hurt. Of course, they don't have to take losses." Crowell indicated the north end of the Base. "One explosion back there! Just one. Placed exactly where it would cut through our last contact to Cencom--inside the safe-storage section where the navigational units of the message drones were kept. Nothing salvageable left."

He shook his head. "You get the picture. They could blow up the whole Base any time they like. There's nothing we could do to stop it. But they don't want it that way. They want to clean it out almost as neatly as they cleaned out the mining camp. When investigators arrive, there'll be a new mystery, a much bigger one. What happened? What hit the Base? Where did the sentinel ship go? All

our reports mentioned so far were problems with a bipedal animal--and hallucinations. Beautifully timed! You know, it could work. It should drive the Cencom computers crazy." He added, "If you can still get to your ship, you'd better do it, get off the planet. That's the only sure way anybody outside is going to find out what's really happened."

"We don't know if we can still get to the ship," Ned said. He looked over at Jill. "Want me along?"

She shook her head quickly. "I'll travel light! As soon as I'm clear of the Base, I'll jettison everything I can, including spare fuel blocks. Might make it to the ship in thirty minutes then. They can use you here. I'll get a drone off, come back with the ship. Luck, Ned!"

"Luck, Jill! If Grant calls, we'll go get him with one of these cars."

She nodded, gave them both a small scared smile, slammed the car door shut. The car soared quickly back toward the open overhead lock, disappeared beyond the bluish glimmer of the screens.

"She shouldn't bring your ship here," Crowell said disapprovingly.

"She should," said Ned. "It's a damn good ship, and it fights itself. I was never trained to handle them, but Jill was. The bipeds may get more of an argument than they're counting on."

Grant Gage stood, back against a tree trunk, shoulder-deep in shrubbery, big rocks to his right and left. A natural blind, just beyond the triggering range of the bipeds' projection trap. The device which controlled the projection was eighty yards away, down the slope on the left. It wasn't visible, wouldn't have been visible if he'd been next to it. They'd camouflaged it in some manner: But he had its position fixed mentally--two feet out from the tip of a patch of dark-yellow growth. He could put an explosive into it from where he stood.

Which he would do if whoever had set up the device didn't return within the next ten minutes to pick it up, now that its usefulness must appear to be over. That would be preferable. But Jill and Ned should have reached the Base, and Crowell Witter's message to Cencom might be about on its way. No reason to delay more than another ten minutes before giving them a prod by knocking out their machine.

Perhaps three of those ten minutes had passed then before he saw something... a haziness forming gradually above a flat, sloping boulder, twenty yards from the device, on the far side of it. Motionless, Grant watched. The haze could be only one thing, though as yet it had no recognizable shape or definite outline. It was like an upright patch of gray fog which stirred and shifted but stayed where it was. It was large enough to enclose a biped. Jill had said that, in the moment when she almost disappeared, sight and sound seemed to blur out in a kind of fog. The bipeds controlled the process. There was one there now--though also not quite there--on that slab of rock, peering out through its subjective fog at the objective details of the slope, possibly to make quite sure there was no human enemy near the device. They'd shown they were suspicious and cautious creatures in spite of their demonstrated ferocity.

The haze faded gradually again, vanished completely. Grant passed his tongue along his lips, wondering. He hadn't stirred; it didn't seem likely he could have been detected here. But he wasn't certain--

Something stirred on his left, close to the front line of trees. He shifted only his eyes. For an instant, he saw the biped--if it was the same one. No ghost shape now, at any rate, but quite substantial, standing in profile a hundred feet away, looking down the slope. An impressive creature, manlike in the way it stood and held itself. But the head was as Jill had described it, something like that of a short-faced bear or pig, except for the large pointed ears.

The figure blurred and disappeared at once. And that, Grant thought, had been no coincidence. If the biped had been merely conducting a preliminary survey of the area, it should have remained in sight longer. It might be trying to draw a reaction from him. It either suspected or knew he was here, perhaps even exactly where he was. They could have instruments which scanned through the shielding fog. He'd seen no instruments, but there'd been a kind of belt around the furred torso. Aside from that, the lack of visible trappings might have made it seem still an animal.

Perhaps a second or two had passed in these reflections. Grant's attention was now chiefly on the area at his right. So he saw the biped reappear. Abruptly in sight, some fifty feet away and slightly below him on the slope, faced toward him, half crouched, one great furred arm extended, giant hand holding a glassy tube pointed at the thicket where he stood--

Grant pitched sideways through the shrubs, down over the rock to his left, flattened out.

Fire exploded the thicket beyond the rock, surged furiously up the tree trunk against which Grant had been standing, flowed out down the slope.

A furnace of heat closed about him. He thrust himself forward, saw,

through blazing vegetation, the biped still crouched on the slope, staring at the thicket, weapon held watchfully pointed. Grant rolled sideways, bringing the Suesvant around and forward in the motion, sighted and triggered. The second shot crowded the first, the third the second, reports merging into a howl of sound. The biped staggered backward along the slope, the glassy weapon arcing high through the air above it. Grant pumped three more shots into the big head, saw the creature strike the ground and begin to blur, got to his feet and leaped across the burning shrubbery.

The biped vanished. Then, as Grant stood still in a shock of disappointment, it reappeared--sprawled out in midair, a few yards above the ground, and a dozen feet from where it had last been. It fell heavily, struck the slope, vanished again--and reappeared again, almost in its previous position. Now it lay still.

Grant flicked a fresh set of shells into the Suesvant, watching the biped, then started downhill toward it. The fire's explosive fury had spent itself; it was making no more headway in the wet vegetation. His left hand went to the wrist transmitter on his right. He looked down, swore softly and fervently.

The face of the little device was crushed, mashed into uselessness against some rock surface in his dive for safety. No way now to contact the others.

. . .

A few things became obvious almost at once. The biped wore a kind of vest, made of a material which so closely matched its own shaggy



hide in appearance that Grant became aware of it only as he began to investigate the fallen creature. The vest ended at the broad belt he'd seen when the biped first appeared. There were sealed pockets in it, and he could feel various devices in the pockets.

The next discovery wasn't unexpected. The biped's skin was no natural armor; it was enclosed in a personal energy field. Grant prodded here and there at the giant, found the protective field seemed to cover everything but the hands and feet. Vest and belt were fastened over it. The field yielded slightly to a steady push but could not be depressed enough to touch the flesh immediately beneath. Obviously it couldn't hamper either the wearer's breathing or his motions, but it seemed almost impervious to forces from without. All Grant's bullets had pierced it; but the body within could have experienced only a fraction of the Suesvant's monstrous jolting effect. Still, that had been enough to kill.

Grant found what turned out to be the field switch on the side of the belt, fumbled at the fastening, got it unlocked, and pulled the switch down. The field went off; and the fur vest, which had seemed to be seamless, opened along the center of the chest. Grant pulled it free of the belt and stared down at the cause of the lumpy deformity of the chest area in these creatures.

They were four-armed. The second pair of arms was set forward on the chest and, while sinewy and well muscled, was much smaller and relatively shorter than the principal pair, in fact barely the size of the arms of an average adult human male. The hands had long, thin, deft-looking fingers. In spite of its bulk, the biped should have been capable of doing very delicate work. The secondary arms had been carried folded on the chest; and one of the hands was closed on something. Grant lifted the arm, and the hand unfolded in the limp submission of death, releasing the object.

Grant picked it up without immediate interest, still staring at the dead biped.

Six-limbed.... The dominant pseudo-mammalian fauna of Kulkoor, to which the bipeds had appeared to belong, was four-limbed. He was looking at the explanation of the Kulkoor Mystery.

No hidden civilization here! The bipeds weren't part of the native life. They'd come from another world, almost certainly for the same reason men had come--to work the planet's heavy metal deposits. They hadn't been here long, or evidence of their mining operations would have been detected. They had a concealed base somewhere; but there might be no more of them on Kulkoor at present than there were humans.

And they'd been trying to drive away a competitive civilized species without revealing what they were....

However technologically advanced they might be, they must feel vulnerable here.

Grant looked down at the object that had been clasped in the biped's hand. Apparently, it had been of value to the biped--it might be of value to him. About three inches long, gray, smooth, pear-shaped with a shallow indentation at the narrow end, rather heavy for its size. A personal amulet, without other significance? Creatures which tried to play on superstition in others should have their own share of it.

He glanced at the lifelessly open hand of the biped. The thick end of the gray pear had been enclosed by the palm. He laid it in his own palm. At its touch, he felt a faint tingling which immediately faded. And now his interest had increased sharply. The thing was powered--powered for some purpose.

He looked at the hand again. It seemed to him that the ball of one of the fingers had been clasped against the top of the pear, pressed into the indentation. He placed his own finger in that position. The tingling resumed briefly, faded again.

His vision misted over.

He blinked, shook his head--and realization came suddenly of what was happening. He almost dropped the gray object, then, instead, lifted his finger away from the tip. At once, the foggily dimming air about him cleared again.

Grant sucked in a quick breath, looked at the biped. So he was holding one of their transportation devices! He was quite sure now that when he first saw it, the biped's finger had still been clamped over the indented tip. But that had produced no effect on the device. While shortly before, immediately after being shot, the giant had twice vanished for an instant. Consciously or not, Grant thought, it had been trying to escape back to wherever it had come from, and hadn't quite made it. It was dying then. Dead, it was solidly here.

The device needed contact with a living body in order to function.

Did it need the direction of a living mind to tell it where to go?

15

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Jill had spent most of the racing drive back to the ship checking on its operating condition as exhaustively as she could from the car.

She discovered nothing wrong with it. Condition was normal. Ultimate sensor scan reported the vicinity clear of suspicious objects.

The aircar's scanners showed the same innocuous picture as she approached the ship. She slowed, gave the recognition code, read the ship's acknowledgment on the tape, set the code on continuous repetition, and moved up to the defense perimeter.

The ship's screens remained off. Everything seemed all right. She bit her lip, gave the signal for the entry lock to open for the car, saw it opening in the viewplate.

The car slid forward into the defense zone.

The world seemed to dim, almost imperceptibly. Jill grew aware of a sound.

It hung about her like the half-heard vibration of a bell, a shuddering in the air. Dreaminess settled on her. Then came jarring fright.

"No!"

The dreaminess was gone. But the aircar was growing vague, fading out in a gray haze. She tried to wrench herself back into its reality, knew she was failing, reached out automatically for the hazy Suesvant on the car door. For an instant, she seemed to touch nothing; then the stock grew firm and cool against her palm, and she snatched the rifle to her. The car controls--

She was no longer in the car. She saw its shadow shape ahead of her in a darkening fog, moving toward the ship. And the ship expanded suddenly into a ball of yellow fire. An explosion which had no sound for Jill. The shadow car vanished in the fire, and the fog closed all around.

• • •

She was in nothingness. But *she* was real. The Suesvant she held had remained real with her.

Otherwise--no sight, no sound. The fog was no fog but the absence of other realities. It had no substance, no temperature. Nothing.

But she was there. She could look down and see herself as if by daylight, hands gripping the rifle. Her lungs breathed, ignoring the fact that logically they should find nothing to breathe. She cleared her throat, heard the sound.

In its way, it began to make sense. If the bipeds used this as a form of transportation, the process itself mustn't hurt her, was nothing to fear. Danger wouldn't develop until it released her again.

A little time passed. Then the fog seemed to be thinning. Jill had waited for that. She pressed the alert button on her wrist transmitter. "Ned?"

No response. Light of sorts appeared gradually about her.

She was within something now. A structure. A long hall with metal walls. Nothing else to be seen. It was like looking through water. She was in motion, drifting along the hall, then slanting toward one of the walls. She touched the wall without sensing the touch, went through it-

-

And was in a vast room. Again there was the metal gleam of enclosing walls, great sleek engines below, moving shapes vaguely seen in the distance beyond the engines. Sound reached her here, the surging hum of power. She turned over and over like a tumbling leaf, was swirled down toward the central engine and into it. Light blazed briefly through her closed lids; furious energies quivered about her... then she was out of that incredible hell, unhurt, untouched. Moving on. More swiftly. A biped appeared suddenly ahead, standing on a catwalk, staring at her. He raised a big arm as if startled by her approach and trying to ward her off. Four-armed? Was he four-armed? She couldn't be certain in a momentary blurred glance. As she swung up the Suesvant, she'd passed through him, gone on through another wall.

A ghost. Moving through sections of the subterranean Kulkoor civilization they'd theorized? It didn't seem so. What she saw here suggested a vital, powerful technology, one that stood openly and boldly on its world, prepared to face any intruder--not the remnants of an advanced but failing culture which must skulk spitefully underground when visitors arrived from the stars. She began to get glimpses of other bipeds. Sometimes they seemed briefly aware of her, sometimes not. Four-armed they were. Why had she failed to notice so significant a detail about the one she'd shot? She had the impression that most of these were smaller, slighter creatures than the giants they'd stalked, though unmistakably of the same species.

Which, of course, could no longer be considered a Kulkoor species.... Had she been transferred to a different world? It seemed possible. At the moment, perhaps almost anything would have seemed possible.

Abruptly the fog grew dense again. For moments only. When it began to fade, Jill knew what the aimless drifting had been about. A temporary delay only because they'd been busy with other matters.

Other prisoners.

For here was an execution chamber.

• • •

It was a small room compared with most of the rest she'd passed through, long and low-ceilinged. Something like a great ventilator grille stretched overhead. One of the big bipeds stood at the far end of the room, looking in her direction. He held a short tubular device in one hand. Against the side of the room was a pile of contorted charred objects. Jill looked at them once and didn't look again.

Did the executioner recognize the Suesvant as a weapon which might be dangerous to him? With her first understanding of where she was, why she was here, Jill had let the rifle down at her side, holding it loosely in one hand, as she stared at the watching biped.

He turned his head; she heard a muted bellowing. The fog thinned farther; she felt a lurch, stood suddenly on the hard flooring of the room, smelled the stench of burned flesh the air rushing through the chamber hadn't yet carried off. The biped was leveling his fire tube.

The Suesvant was leveled much faster. The executioner didn't wear a body screen. He was dead as two slugs smashed him back against the wall.

*Nowwhat?* Jill thought.

In answer, the fog enclosed her again. Again, things went swirling

past, vaguely glimpsed. She was back in the immaterial half-world. The chamber had vanished instantly, but now a landscape was emerging about her, below her. A wraith of a landscape, pale, without color. Nevertheless, she recognized the formation of those shadowy mountain ranges at once and knew she was on Kulkoor. When she looked down, there was a lake below her--far down, at least two thousand feet. The glacier lake which formed the northern border of the area where they'd tracked two bipeds and she'd shot one. She looked in the direction from which she seemed to have come. There, within the shadow bulk of a mountain ridge, lay a shape, a huge oblong shape, tapering to a point at one end.

*A ship*, Jill thought. A gigantic spaceship, lying within the mountain. Four-arms had come to Kulkoor from a world of a distant star....

As she stared at the ship, its outlines faded. The mountains about her, the lake below, began to acquire color and solidity. For an instant, there was the brush of cold wind, a flash of brilliant daylight. She reached quickly for the alert button of the wrist transmitter, pressed it. She'd been returned to the world of reality, to die there. A two-thousand-foot drop to the lake would be a simple way to dispose of an unexpectedly recalcitrant prisoner.

But there might be time....

Somewhere then, somebody's mind changed; and the fog enclosed her again.

• • •



And this then was the control deck of the great ship. It could be nothing else. It was correspondingly huge, about a fifth of it filled with instrument banks, arranged before a curving viewscreen along wall and ceiling. The wall on the left showed what seemed to be outlines of the layered decks of the ship, about forty, their shifting light and color patterns signaling information to the control deck. A relative few of the instruments were manned. In all, around thirty bipeds were in sight, two of them the giant type. The others weren't of much more than human height. With their lighter build, their weight might be barely a fourth that of the giants.

Jill had been stopped near the center of the deck. A number of bipeds stood about, staring at her. The fog effect seemed very slight, but she knew she was still separated from them. Her feet seemed to be touching the floor, but when she took a step forward, her position on the deck didn't change. She held the Suesvant ready for use. The two big bipeds were armed. The others weren't.

Within a minute, the reason she was here was made apparent. The entire wall on the right side of the control deck became a viewscreen. Through it, Jill was looking into another room, as high-ceilinged as this one, though less wide. A dozen of the smaller bipeds stood and moved about there. Behind them was a specimen of a third biped variety—one which shrank the mighty ogres into insignificance. Seated human fashion in a great chair, it had the bulk of one of Earth's dinosaurs. Standing, it would have topped twenty-five feet.

She'd been brought here to be looked over by this four-armed entity—Ship's Captain, Being in Charge, sitting in a command room before a set of instruments designed for its proportions. Did it ever leave the room? Probably. Much of the ship was shaped for hugeness. It was the Suesvant they were interested in, of course. She'd demonstrated again what it could do, in executing their executioner.

They wanted the weapon for study. The Being in Charge eyed her a long minute from the screen; then its voice boomed briefly. The viewscreen went blank, became again a wall of the control deck. Her fate had been decided.

The control deck faded from sight.

• • •

Grant picked up the dead biped's heat weapon. It was heavy; he needed both hands to hold it and aim it at the body above him on the slope. He thumbed down the stud, and the body and the ground about it blazed furiously. When the biped's fellows came searching for it, they should find something of a mystery to brood about, for a change. Grant shut off the device, clipped its end to his belt. It was an awkward weight; but the thing could be useful again. He picked up the fur vest he'd pulled off the body. Its sealed pockets were crammed with a variety of articles which might be investigated in detail at another time. Two of them, however, were gray pear-shaped instruments of the kind the biped had been holding in its hand. Emergency spares. It wouldn't have cared to find itself suddenly without a working device of that type available to it.

Their personal transportation method. Grant didn't know what limitations there might be on its effective range, but that information wasn't important now. He'd found out what he needed to know. The brain supplied directions; the gray instrument did what it did. You visualized the place you wanted to be, or you'd find yourself simply floating in the fogs of nowhere as your finger came down into the instrument's hollowed tip, closed contact. But visualize the place, and

you went there. You emerged quickly or slowly, as you chose. Or you didn't emerge at all, remained just within nowhere, a ghost, a near-invisibility, peering out into a shadow world.

A very practical device. He'd tested it during the past few minutes, had made a number of longer shifts back and forth across the slope. Ready now for a purposeful jump.... He hung the biped's vest over his left arm, took the gray instrument in his right hand, closed contact.

Fog swept in, thinned. He halted the process mentally. He was inside a room, vaguely defined but recognizable. It was in the Medical Section of the Star Union Base; he and Jill and Ned had been taken there to see the bodies of the people killed in Station Three. No one around at present. Grant came out of the fringes of nowhere into the room....

Into a storm of sound! Siren blaring in the air, sinking to an angry whine. Thud of energy bolts. A Suesvant's flat hard crack--

• • •

"Jill was to bring the ship here," Ned said, wiping sweat from his face. "They may have got her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Grant, I'm not saying they have! I don't know! I had an alert signal from her not more than ten minutes ago. I couldn't acknowledge. The bipeds were trying to break through--forcing it. They're getting impatient. I tried to contact Jill first chance I got. I've kept the alert

button down. She hasn't replied."

"Ten minutes... how long can you hold out here?"

Crowell said, "They'll finish it any time they quit worrying about what it costs. Four car guns and the north turret left. At the present level of attack, we might last half an hour or more."

"One of you come along," Grant told them. "I have two spares of that space jumping gadget. We can do something with that."

"Your job," Ned said to Crowell. He looked at Grant, tapped the Suesvant. "This could make an additional quarter hour's difference here. You go after Jill."

Crowell and Grant ran across the square, past the living and dead, almost ignored by the Base's diminished survivors. Only a few faces-pale, sweat-streaked, shocked--turned to look after them. In the room in the Medical Section, Grant took the biped's two spares from the fur vest, handed one to Crowell, snapped the heat weapon back on his belt.

"I'll see about Jill as soon as you know how to use it," he said. "Here's what you do--"

. . .

When Grant went back into the nowhere fog, visualizing the Galestral ship's control room, nothing happened immediately. Then the fog darkened. A rumbling earthquake sensation began, building up quickly in violence. Grant had an awareness of imminent, ultimate

danger. His mind snatched at another visualization. For a moment, that seemed to alter nothing. Then the rumbling faded. The fog thinned, vanished. The dangling fire weapon slapped heavily against his thigh. Grant slipped the transporting device into his pocket, looked quickly around.

He stood under the overhang of a great cliff, fallen boulders about him, a rounded shallow valley below, mountains lifting above the forest beyond the valley.

This was the point where they'd left Jill stationed when they prepared to ambush the biped. He'd needed a place to which he could retreat safely; and his mind had produced this picture, brought him here. It seemed a good choice. A familiar area, free at the moment of bipeds, screened from the observation of bipeds. Animals were in view in the valley, browsing undisturbed. The cliffs and the tumbled boulders concealed him.

He should have gone to their ship's control room. He had a strong conviction that instead he'd nearly been projected into a final nothingness. The control room no longer existed. Their ship no longer existed. He was being drawn into nonexistence when he'd veered away to this other place....

Ghost biped, prowling about the ship's defense perimeter as their aircar approached. It could look into the ship's opening lock. It could project itself later into the lock. From then on, an unseen presence moved occasionally about the ship. The ship had become alien property. When the aliens no longer had a use for it, it was destroyed.

And Jill--

He couldn't think of Jill as dead, as nonexistent. The bipeds took

captives, had tried to take her captive earlier today.

Grant slipped his hand back into his pocket, closed it about the transporting device. He brought Jill's face into his mind, pictured it a few feet from his own. He kept the picture there as he pressed his finger into the indentation at the tip of the instrument.

Fog condensed, thinned.

The first thing he saw then wasn't Jill. It was the round black muzzle of a Suesvant pointed at him. The Suesvant was jerked aside.

"Grant!" A thin whisper.

Small bare cube of a room with seamless metal walls and nothing that looked like a door. Jill was staring at him, eyes huge in a chalk-white face.

## 16

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Grant hadn't known it was going to work, but he thought it should work. It did. He'd simply picked Jill up instantly and visualized the overhang above the valley. The transporting instrument took them there. He set her down, took the biped's second spare from his pocket. Jill learned how to use it.

Then she talked.

"*Inside* a mountain?" Grant said.

"But outside our space." Jill added, "It must work along the same general lines as their transporters, on a huge scale. If we were standing by the lake, I could show you the mountain."

"They've got other prisoners," said Grant then.

She shook her head. "We won't have to consider that." Before being left in the exitless cell, she'd been shifted to another part of the ship, a large laboratory devoted to the study of the human enemy. The enemy had been thoroughly studied. Something floated in a transparent container. Most of its organs were suspended in the container beside it but still connected to it. The extracted heart beat steadily away, and the thing might be conscious because its eyes turned to Jill when she appeared in the laboratory, and remained fixed on her. There was a large number of other study subjects.

Jill evidently was destined for the laboratory after they got the Suesvant from her without harming her. The three bipeds on duty there looked her over in her semi-material state for a minute or two; then one of them waved a hand and she was shifted off to the cell. "They experimented with the first human group they picked up," she said. "What's left of them isn't salvageable. The people transported in from the Star Union Base were killed on arrival. A simple way to dispose of them."

"Then that's it," Grant said. "You go ahead. I'll come in beside you."

They unslung the Suesvants. Jill took the alien instrument in her left hand. She vanished.

The ship's great control deck appeared before Grant. Jill was standing four feet to his right.

The wide door space behind them was empty. They moved farther apart. The wall on the right was a wall at present, not a viewscreen. Two big-armed bipeds stood halfway between them and the instrument section, watching a scattering of smaller bipeds at work. One of the smaller ones was moving along the rows of consoles, but it didn't look around. No one had seen them appear. No biped as yet--unless they'd happened to check Jill's cell in the last few minutes--should have reason to suspect that a human had obtained some of their transportation devices, had found out how to use them.

They fired together. The big bipeds were hurled forward, struck the floor ponderously, already dead. On the ship, they'd had no reason to wear body screens. Until now.

Grant gave no attention to the smaller bipeds. They were Jill's business. Except for the first one, the shells he'd be using here were explosives and incendiaries. Their targets were the instrument banks.

He fired as quickly as he ever had in his life. A continuous crashing moved along the stands; flames and smoke erupted. Biped voices howled briefly through the commotion, went silent. Jill stopped firing. She stood half-turned to Grant, gaze sweeping the deck. Then she flicked the Suesvant up suddenly, firing past Grant toward the entry. A few seconds later, she fired again.

Grant didn't turn. That was still Jill's department unless she indicated she needed help. He continued his work of demolition. There were secondary explosions at the end of the control deck, other sounds.



One of the vast ship's nerve centers was being shredded. How effectively, he couldn't tell.

Then Jill lifted her hand, shouted his name. They hadn't known how long it would take others in the ship to become aware of the destruction being wreaked on the control deck and to alert defenders; but staging a final fight here was no part of their plan. Time to move--

The first shift was a short one, to the far side of the deck, beyond the control stands. Looking back toward the entrance, Grant saw four big biped forms on the floor, one struggling to rise. Weapons lay about them.

"The last one had a body screen!"

"Did he transport in?"

Jill shook her head. "Came in from the hall with the others!"

So the counterattack wasn't organized yet. But it couldn't be long in coming. Grant slung the Suesvant over his shoulder, took the biped heat weapon from his belt. At close range, it should complete the wreckage caused by the rifle.

It did. Great gouts of white fire crashed through the stands. There were renewed explosions and arcing energy bolts about the consoles. Through the racket, Grant heard Jill's shout again, glanced quickly over at her, saw Crowell standing beside her, a heavy shock gun in his hands. Jill caught Crowell's arm, said something, yelled to Grant, "Three just transported in--other side of the deck! Witter can follow us."

She was gone. Grant snapped the fire weapon back on his belt, took the Suesvant in his left hand, the transporter in his right.

Fog washed in, cleared away. Jill there, on his left--and Crowell materializing abruptly a few steps to the right. The gigantic biped Jill had described, arms like shaggy brown tree trunks braced against the table before it, was leaning forward, attention on a screen from which rose a blurred gabbling. The guns lashed out together.

It was like assaulting a god, an animal deity.

The huge body staggered. The head, swinging toward the intruders, was instantly blinded. The giant took a swaying step and began turning. An arm flailed, smashed into the screen. The great biped kept turning, falling, went down.

"Let's go--" And Jill was gone again.

• • •

Four more vulnerable points struck, briefly, ruinously. Surprise still on their side--no other armed bipeds had appeared to dispute their presence, prevent what they were doing. Then a sixth shift; and Crowell said, "Why here?" Jill had guided them to a narrow gallery above a wide hallway. They heard biped voice sounds, though no biped was in sight.

Jill said, "They won't look for us here."

"But there's nothing to--"

"When that engine went, I felt something else! The ship might be beginning to go."

"The ship?" Crowell said. "This is a *ship*?"

Jill nodded. "A very big one. But we may have hurt it enough. That was like a series of explosions on the decks beneath us--or some distance away."

Grant said, "We'd better be sure! I didn't notice anything." They looked at one another a moment, faces pale and taut. Grant asked Crowell, "How did you find us?"

Crowell grunted. "Mental fix on your Suesvant. Easy to visualize! Where it was, you'd be. You seemed to have an idea on how we could use their gadgets. You did. But shouldn't we--"

He broke off. A biped had materialized in the hall beneath them. It lifted its great arms in the air, uttered blaring cries, turning this way and that. Other voices responded. A group of aliens ran past. Somewhere not far off, an intercom cut in. What they heard then might have been the voice of the giant they had brought down--a huge ululating; mournful noise. It ended abruptly.

Now the hall below suddenly filled with the alien creatures. They seemed to be pouring out of other passages, went streaming by in both directions, milling aimlessly, squalling, clasping their heads.

The gallery swayed. The tumult below swelled up. Jill caught her breath. "Stronger now!" she said. "But that's what it felt like!"

There was a distant thudding of explosion. Shrieks rose from the hall. Crowell said shortly, "*They* seem to believe the ship's going!"

Another explosion came, heavier or more close than the previous one. Grant said, "All right. Let's get out!" He looked at Crowell. "We'll

meet you at the Base. Jill and I have one more stop to make."

"Huh?"

"Frank Farquhar's aircruiser," said Grant. "We can go to it now wherever he hid it. He had a store of message drones there."

. . .

The alien ship went five minutes later. There might have been frantic work on board to contain the chain of destructive reactions surging through it. If so, they were unsuccessful. The remaining defenders of the Star Union Base saw a sheet of brilliant purple light leap from the northern mountain ranges to the sky. Kulkoor's surface shuddered. Presently there came the faraway thunderings of a great explosion.

Grant and Jill had returned by then with the sack of drones they'd scooped up in Farquhar's cruiser. The Base remained on alert. The biped group attacking it apparently had been recalled to the stricken ship; but others could have been left on Kulkoor. Survivors might seek revenge.

Then Grant made a discovery. He'd decided to transport back to the cruiser and fly it in to the Base. Farquhar could have had records of deductions he'd made about the bipeds. Grant found that the transporting instrument would no longer transport him. It did nothing, seemed dead. They tried out the other two devices and had the same experience with them. Evidently they'd been powered by the ship and wouldn't operate now it was gone.

That ended any concern about bipeds who might still be around. If they were, they had no more mobility now than that provided by their legs. They couldn't become a problem. A guncar sent to check reported that the whole hump of mountain inside which the great ship had been concealed had vanished with it.

So then it was time at last to count the dead and missing. There were almost no wounded. Where biped weapons had struck, they'd killed.

It was a long, long list of names.

. . .

"Most of the stuff may not be too important," Crowell remarked late that night. He was in his office with Ilken and the Galestrals, and the assortment of articles which had been found in the furred biped vest were spread out on a table. They'd been going over them together. "I'm hardly much of a physicist, but I doubt any very significant new discoveries will be made when specialists take the things apart."

There were thoughtful nods. Ned said, "That seems probable. Nothing too exciting there."

"These, of course," Crowell went on, touching one of the three lifeless transporters lying aside from the rest, "should be a different matter...."

"Quite different!" Ned agreed again, dryly.

Crowell regarded his companions. They gazed reflectively back at

him. Jill, relaxed in a chair, knees crossed, seemed unaware of the Suesvant laid casually across her lap. Grant's and Ned's rifles were slung as casually from their shoulders. Of course, Galestrals reputedly rarely were seen separated from their deadly pets. Ilken's pale eyes were alert and she carried her brace of tarsh knives well forward on her belt. But there was nothing really unusual about that either.

Crowell tilted back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head.

"One thing we do know about the bipeds," he observed, "is that they came a long way to reach Kulkoor. A civilization like theirs couldn't exist in an area touched by our exploration ships without being noticed. It's reasonable to assume they wouldn't have come that far on a mining operation unless the range and efficiency of their warp drive makes anything we've developed look pathetic."

"That does seem a quite reasonable assumption," Jill told him.

"You think so, too, eh?" Crowell brought his chair forward, nudged the transporters. "Would you say the warp drive and these gadgets should operate on the same basic principles?"

Jill nodded. "Uh-huh. Except for range, they must do much the same thing. And range might depend mainly on controllable power."

Crowell remarked to Grant, "You took the transporters from the biped you killed. Technically, they're yours, you know--spoils of war!"

Grant smiled briefly. "Except for another technicality! I'm an employee-shareholder of the Galestral Company and obtained those items on a Company assignment. That makes them Company property."

Crowell grunted. "What do you think the Company will do with them?"

Jill said judiciously, "Well, to begin with, of course, it will clamp on complete secrecy. Then try to work out the principles. Apply them to ship drives. Build a few ships. Keep on improving the drives."

"What kind of ships?"

She studied him, shrugged. "Battlewagons, with at least the mass the bipeds had here. If they happen to come back in force, the Galestral Company will want to be ready for them."

"Cencom would figure it like that," Crowell agreed. "And Cencom will be breaking its neck to get at those principles!"

"I imagine it will," Jill said. "If a warp drive is developed, the Company won't want it to become generally available within any foreseeable time. It'll limit its use to support its own overall policies."

Ned said mildly, "The drive's existence in itself would force those policies to change, Jill!"

"In three, four decades, yes. It needn't change them basically then."

"Captain Witter," Grant said, "what would Cencom do if it had possession of the transporters?"

"Oh, about the same!" Crowell leaned back in his chair again. "Just about the same thing. Try to develop the warp drive and keep control of it. As long as possible. If Star Union citizens could warp away out of contact whenever they felt like it, what would become of Cencom's authority?"

"Then isn't this a somewhat theoretical discussion?" Ned asked him. "Of the two, naturally, I'd prefer the Galestral Company to wind up

with the transporters. Everyone left alive on the Base knows we have them. Unless they're destroyed--which would make no sense at all--who actually does get control of them should depend primarily on whose relief expedition manages to get here first. That could turn into a rather close race!"

"It won't matter who wins it," Crowell said, "if we send the transporters off by message drone tonight."

No one spoke for a few seconds. "One to the Company, one to Cencom?" Ned said then. "And let both know it's been done? It would put them in another race against each other--but it should avoid any head-on trouble." He added, "But it still won't make the warp drive available to individual Star Union citizens or Galestral employees. You won't have affected that."

"They'd keep it from us by tacit agreement," Crowell acknowledged. "So a third drone and the third transporter go simultaneously to the headquarters of the Swimmer League on Varien. A three-way race then--one the swimmers should win. They have the newest and most sophisticated technology, but so far they haven't had a drive good enough to make their mobile cities independent of the Star Union and Cencom. They'll work hard to get it. When they have it, they'll start moving out. And they have the same motive for wanting a warp drive to become generally available that Cencom and your Company have for not wanting it. It will break up the present systems of control. Everything becomes fluid again; and Cencom and the Company have to go along with a new situation. The swimmers will broadcast those principles as soon as they know what they are!" Crowell looked around the group. "Well?"

Ned Brock shook his head. "Everything becomes fluid again.... If I acted as a Company man should about this, I'd simply find myself outvoted. I won't bother to do it. Let's set the drones up to go out!"



