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AMOEBIA-HUNT

BY R. H. REMINGTON

The problem: how to capture an animal that you can't shoot, bomb, stun or trap? The crew of the SPARTACUS had to find the answer or return to the slavery they had so recently escaped.

Abner Hudek came up out of his chair so fast that he was standing fully upright before his seat had had time to sink down and merge back into the floor.

"What was that?" he said in a choked voice.

Lord Glanders yawned and examined his over-long fingernails with an air of affected boredom. When he spoke, his words were even more mincing and his tones more patronizing than usual.

"I've asked you," he said, "to catch an amoeba for me. I want one for my private zoo. If you don't care to undertake the assignment you are free to leave, but I must insist on your preserving the proper deportment for one of your class whatever you decide to do. Another outbreak like that and I shall be forced to have you chastised."

His face burning, Hudek

bowed his head humbly and made the proper apologies. He bent into a sitting position and the seat rose up again to meet him.

Lord Glanders acknowledged the apology with a gracious nod.

Hudek stared at the flaccid face and corpulent figure of the man sitting opposite him. Too much time in space, Hudek realized, especially as captain of his own ship, made a man forget the social usages of twenty-second century Earth. He would have to be extremely careful. A chastisement could mean anything from ten lashes to the loss of his ship and a return to hopeless bondage for Hudek and his crew.

And there would be no possibility of appeal from Lord Glanders' action, whatever form it took. For Hudek and his men were of the Emp Class. Free



spacemen now, it was true, but all sons of bonded Emps, and their word would be meaningless beside that of Lord Glanders who was not only a member of the Supe Class, but a director-son of the far-flung Atproco in the bargain.

"If Your Lordship please," Hudek began, this time in a much subdued voice, "would you explain further? I don't quite understand what it is you want of me."

Lord Glanders smiled. These free Emps had to be treated with a firm hand or they forgot their place.

"It's quite simple, my good man. Baron Welk of Incomco has been making himself unbearable boasting of the new multileg in his collection, which he brought back last month from a hunting trip on Sirius II. I've decided that an exhibition of a caged amoeba at the next Atproco Ball will be an effective way of silencing the tiresome Baron. Your ship has been recommended to me as ideal for this sort of undertaking. It's much too important for me to chance entrusting to the Emps of my space-yacht."

Hudek was still floundering. "B-but Your Lordship! An amoeba is a microscopic animal! And what do you want a space-ship for? Any stagnant pond—"

"How long have you been out in space, Hudek? It's been almost a year since reports arrived on Earth of the discovery of giant amoebas on Procyon IV!"

Hudek sank back in his seat with a sigh of relief. "Oh, *giant* amoebas!" Then he began to see difficulties again. "But, Lord Glanders, how does one go about capturing an amoeba?"

Lord Glanders shrugged. "That's your problem, Hudek. Rope it; smother it into submission; I don't care. However, I want it alive and in perfect condition. Are you willing to take the commission?"

Hudek considered silently for a moment. The only way free ships like Hudek's *Spartacus* were able to make out was by doing jobs too difficult for bonded vessels. Most of the money from the previous voyage was eaten up. Let them once get into debt, and the crew of the *Spartacus* could kiss their ship and their freedom good-bye.

It was impolite to state a price, but Hudek knew from past experience that the Supes rewarded generously anyone who enabled them to achieve a slight triumph over another of their class. Lord Glanders' reputation was good, in that respect at least.

"I'll do it," Hudek said heavily.

"Good man!" Lord Glanders

rose, indicating that the interview was terminated. Hudek rose also, respectfully, and both chairs became one with the gold-cloth rug on the floor. A liveried butler arrived in answer to Lord Glanders' ring, and Hudek prepared to follow him to the Emp's exit. When Hudek was at the door of the room, Lord Glanders called out, "By the way, Hudek, when do you expect to be ready to leave?"

Hudek considered. "It will take about a week to round up supplies and equipment."

Lord Glanders nodded. "Good. Have a suite made ready for myself and a few servants. I'll have my things brought over tomorrow." He touched a spot on the wall.

Hudek stepped forward. "B-but—" he began, and found himself facing a blank wall. Lord Glanders was gone.

Back on the *Spartacus*, Hudek assembled his crew in the mess hall and told them the story. He had been afraid they wouldn't approve, and, when he had finished speaking, he could see his suspicions confirmed in their angry faces.

Chief Engineer McGill was the first to break the heavy silence.

"Look, Skipper," he said, "I've been with you since the day the *Spartacus* shipped on her maiden

voyage as a free ship with a free crew, and I've always tended to my engines and let you do the thinking. If you say we go after a giant amoeba, that's all right with me: you'll think of some way of grabbing its tail. But this business of Lord Glanders coming along— It won't work and you know it!"

The other crewmen grumbled their disapproval.

"The damn Supe will act like he owns every one of us!"

"We'll have to spend half our time wiping His Lordship's nose!"

"What's the point of being a free spaceman with a Supe on board? It'll be the same as being a bonded Emp again!"

Hudek raised a hand for attention and the grumbling died down slightly.

"I know how you men feel," he shouted, above the din, "Believe me, I feel the same way about taking a Supe aboard the *Cuss*. What choice do we have? Sure, I could turn him down, but then what? Free ships can't compete in the open market with bonded ones; the Supes would rather see us out of business. A few more weeks of idleness and the dock fees will have eaten up all our cash. This way, we go through a few months of taking dirt from a Supe—we've done that before: it's not easy but we

can stand it—and we'll be that much closer to buying our families out of empage. What do you say, men?"

That stopped them. Each of them dreamed nightly of that wonderful future day when all their families would be free and the *Spartacus* would take off from Earth for the last time, holds full of equipment for founding a free colony somewhere in the stars.

It wouldn't be easy, but others had managed it. Not many, but some. The crew of the *Spartacus* had at least achieved the first, most difficult, step. Freedom for themselves, and a means of earning their loved ones' freedom.

Slowly, reluctantly, they signified their willingness to go along with Hudek in his plans, and left the mess hall.

Hudek watched them leave, a frown creasing his forehead. His crew had faith in him. If he said it would be right, they believed it would be. Hudek knew better.

What he had told the men had been true enough, but there was more to it. He glowered at the thought of a Supe lording it through the free corridors of the *Cuss*. Hudek felt a personal attachment for every inch of the battered ship, from her extra-large cargo lock to her spotless control room. He could still taste

the pleasure of the day he, McGill, Blenkins the Astrogator, and a few others—all of them newly out of empage and none caring to discuss just how—had pooled their meager funds and taken over the *Spartacus*, rusty and condemned in a ship graveyard.

They'd slaved, harder than they had ever worked in empage, to make her spaceworthy, and now, Hudek thought proudly, she was the equal of anything in space.

And they stood a good chance of losing her.

It was perfectly true that the laws of Earth did not hold in space: once out of the atmosphere Hudek, as captain, was the sole authority. Yet let Hudek, or any member of his crew, offend Lord Glanders, and His Lordship had merely to enter a complaint when the ship got back to Earth, and the *Spartacus* and her crew would never see space again.

Hudek walked down the passageway to his cabin up forward, shaking his head at the trouble he foresaw. Things had not always been like this. Hudek remembered the legends of the days centuries ago, when his ancestors had been free to walk the Earth, heads upright, equal to all other men. That was before all power had been con-

centrated in the hands of the mighty Twenty Companies. The families who controlled the Companies had developed into an aristocracy. All others, employees perforce of the Companies, had slowly lost their rights as free men and women and fallen into serfdom.

It was possible to buy your way out of empage, if you hoarded every quarter-credit a condescending Supe threw your way, but the trick was to stay free in a world where practically all means of making a living were controlled by Supes who preferred to have their own bonded Emps do the work. Entertainers were most fortunate, of course, because in a world where an Emp's word—even a free Emp's—was insignificant beside that of a Supe, a person who made his living by pleasing or amusing the Supes was fairly well off.

Trouble was, not everyone had talent. The rest of the free-men had to shift as best they could. Hudek and his crew were lucky in having been born as Emps to the Intransco — Interstellar Transportation Company. It gave them a trade, once they managed to get out of empage.

Hudek arrived at his cabin and called for the Third Mate on the intercom. Williams, Third Mate, only two trips removed

from empage, barged through Hudek's door and said, his voice still charged with the joy of freedom, "Hi, Abner! What can I do for you?"

Hudek grinned at the young man. He remembered his own reactions at not having to grovel before Supes anymore.

"Terry," he said. "Here's fifty credits. Get out and buy every book you can find that refers in any way to the amoeba. I want all the information I can get. This is going to be a tough job."

Terry Williams nodded, took the money, and started for the doorway. Hudek's voice stopped him.

"One more thing, Terry. Be careful. Remember to step out of the way when a Supe passes you. And if one of them addresses you, be respectful as you can. The *Spartacus* can't afford to bail out its Third Mate, so don't get into trouble."

Williams grinned widely. "Sure thing, Cap. I've been thinking about that job we've taken on. If someone told me to catch an amoeba, I wouldn't know what to do. Do you have any ideas, Cap?"

Hudek sank wearily into the chair behind his desk.

"I have no ideas at all, Terry," he told him. "No one's ever caught one before. An amoeba is just a blob of protoplasm.

You can't grab it or even hit it on the head because there isn't anything to grab or hit. We'll just have to do the best we can."

Williams nodded sympathetically and left the cabin.

Hudek spent the rest of the day requisitioning supplies and preparing quarters for Lord Glanders and his entourage.

Lord Glanders' baggage arrived the next day. Hudek had just finished making room for the Supe's three personal Emps, two pet Martian sub-dogs and their trainer, and four times as much luggage as was carried by all the crew of the *Spartacus*, when Lord Glanders arrived himself. Twenty well-wishers came with him, and a farewell party was thrown of such proportions that it took the crew the first two weeks of the voyage to clean up the debris and restore the *Cuss* to something resembling her former spotlessness.

On the day of departure At-proco declared a special holiday and every Emp who could be spared from the city's factories was driven to the docks to see the director-son off.

Lord Glanders was unaccustomed to the rigors of space as it was experienced on a tramp cargo vessel, and when he was miserable he saw to it that everyone around him was miserable. Hudek had to spend so much

time pacifying the irate noble that he was unable to examine the books Williams had brought him until the third week out.

He had decided that the most useful information to be gleaned from the books was that giant amoebas could not possibly exist, when his intercom squawked and came to life. Chief Engineer McGill's voice sounded, frightened but determined.

"Sorry, Skipper, but I'm afraid we're in for stormy weather. I just kicked our passenger out of the engine room! You'd better go soothe him."

"You did *what!*"

McGill's voice was still defiant. "I'll take all responsibility, Abner. I know what it means, but I'd do it again if I had to. The damned Supe came back aft and told me to cut the speed of the ship. Said it was interfering with his pet pooch's digestion, or something. When I told him I took orders only from you he made a pass at the throttle. I eased him out of the engine room gently as I could, but you tell the dumb—"

Hudek tore out of his cabin, leaving McGill's voice chipping paint off the bulkheads.

He found Lord Glanders pacing angrily up and down the confines of his narrow quarters. The Supe's personal Emp, who opened the door of the cabin in

answer to Hudek's knock, wore a frightened expression and scurried out of the Supe's sight as quickly as possible.

Lord Glanders spun on his heel to face Hudek and began a heated oration. Hudek cut him short.

"Lord Glanders," he said, in a quiet, steel-edged voice, "it's time we got something straight. No matter what our relative positions were before the voyage, and no matter what they will be once we get back to Earth, during this voyage I am master of this vessel and you are a passenger. Remember that! What you tried to do in the Engine Room was inexcusable. Your actions endangered the safety of the ship and the lives of the crew. If you have any complaints in the future, bring them to me and I'll see what I can do. Another attempt to take matters into your own hands, and I'll have you locked in your cabin!"

Hudek stepped back and waited for the explosion.

It wasn't forthcoming. Lord Glanders' face grew livid, then purple. He gulped for air a few times and became suddenly very calm, the color slowly draining from his face. He smiled, and Hudek found it an extremely frightening smile.

Lord Glanders' voice was smooth, smooth as a rattlesnake's

fang—and as dangerous. "Very well, *Captain* Hudek," he said. "We'll continue the trip on your terms. As you say, things will be different when we return to Earth!"

When Hudek arrived back at his own cabin, Chief Engineer McGill was waiting for him, apprehension twisting his features, leather-hard from the weathers of countless planets.

"How did it go, Skipper?"

Hudek sighed, and poured two drinks from the bottle on his desk.

"Looks like we're in for it when we get back, Mac. It's not your fault. You did what you should have done; I'm afraid I blew my top when I told Lord Glanders off."

McGill cleared a space in the litter of biology texts and sat down on the corner of Hudek's desk. He held his glass up, peering into its murky interior. When he spoke, finally, he didn't raise his eyes to Hudek's.

"There's only one way out, Abner," he said in a low voice, "and you know it. Right or wrong, Lord Glanders will see to it we're all done in, once he's safe on Earth. We can't let him get back to do it. He won't be the first Supe we've killed, you and I."

"It won't do, Mac!" Hudek's voice was uneven. "Those other

times it was kill or be killed; on-the-spot self-defense. What you're proposing would be pre-meditated, cold-blooded, murder! We aren't built that way!"

McGill shrugged and swallowed his drink.

"How are we built, then? Are we built so that we can lose the 'Cuss, turn the crew back into Empage, and never see our families again, just because we ruffled the feelings of a good-for-nothing Supe?"

He strode to the door, then turned. "You decide, Skipper. I'll go along with you as I always have. Just give me some advance notice, so I can burn all those pretty little plans we made for our colony." He slammed the door behind him.

For the rest of the night Hudek sat unmoving at his desk, his eyes fixed on the disordered pile of books, but instead of them he saw the faces of his wife, Myra, and his two infant sons, all three Emps, owned body and soul by the Director of Intransco.

Procyon IV was small, with a gravity one-fourth that of Earth. It was water-bound; only a few bare, pointed, peaks broke through the surface of the dark green ocean that enveloped the silent, planet. The expedition which had reported the giant amoebas, discovered while they

were investigating the planet's mineral potentialities, had christened the world, *Teardrop*, but it was hard to associate any affectionate human term with Procyon IV's cheerless surface.

The *Spartacus*, built to withstand any environment, skimmed over the waters, then dived nose-first into them, automatic sealing-devices going into action to protect the jet tubes.

The anti-gravity drive took over, bringing the ship gently to rest on an underwater plateau, 700 feet below the surface.

When the last landing tremor had subsided, the Third Mate raised his freckled face from the control panel and asked, "What say, Cap; shall I switch off the ship's grav?"

Hudek considered.

"No, Terry," he said finally. "The ship is geared to normal Earth gravity. *Teardrop* has only one-fourth normal, and it would play hob with internal conditions. The last time we went off normal, the cook told me—"

He stopped suddenly. Lord Glanders had strolled into the Control Room. Hudek could feel the warm camaraderie of space drain away, as each crewman present stiffened into wariness at the sight of the hated Supe.

Lord Glanders nodded slightly to Hudek and ignored the others. He stepped past the quarter-

master and ordinary, busy at work testing conditions outside the ship, and peered out of the visiplat near the Third Mate's post.

"Nasty looking place," he said, shuddering delicately. "All that water . . . I don't see any amoebas, though. Are you sure this is the right planet, Captain Hudek?"

Terry Williams guffawed loudly. "It ain't Mars!

The quartermaster started to laugh, then remembered Lord Glanders and bent hurriedly to his work.

Lord Glanders turned and surveyed the grinning Third Mate.

"Very amusing. Uh — Williams, isn't it? Former Atproco Emp? Ah, yes, very amusing." He looked as if he were making entries in a mental notebook.

Hudek cleared his throat. "Did you want to see me about something, Lord Glanders?"

The Supe nodded, and moved back to the visiplat. "Yes, Hudek. When do you plan to begin operations?"

"Once the ship is secure," Hudek told him. "I've had men busy in the machine shop all trip building cages and traps. We'll start hunting for that amoeba of yours in a few hours."

Yawning noisily in an overly-affected way, Lord Glanders left

the visiplat and started for the door.

"Good. See that you do. This trip is taking much too long. If I'm to be back in time for the Atproco ball, you'll have to show a little speed."

The click of the door came only a split second before Terry Williams exploded into a corroding space curse.

Hudek put his hand on the quivering Third Mate's shoulder.

"Easy, boy. There's no point in losing our heads. We're all in a bad mess together, and the only way we'll ever get out of it is by thinking our way out. Finish securing the ship and get a party ready to go after the amoeba. You'll find me in the machine shop getting the equipment we'll need."

The young man exhaled loudly and grunted an assent. As Hudek left the control room, he heard the Third Mate shouting orders into the intercom.

Hudek was the first man out of the airlock. He waited for the others to assemble outside the ship, carefully testing the responses of his pressure resistant spacesuit. The trouble was, Hudek had never been in this sort of environment before, and his movements were labored and awkward. But that would wear off in time, he knew.

When all the paraphernalia of

the chase had been unloaded, the five men of the hunting crew stood unsteadily before Hudek, waiting for orders. The beams of their helmet lights criss-crossed like rapiers as each of them examined the others. Refraction and the undersea gloom made the once-familiar spacesuits look like unearthly monsters. Hudek snapped on his suit radio and all the light-beams centered on him.

"Can everyone hear me?" Hudek asked, ignoring the booming sound his voice made in the close confines of the helmet. He waited until all five replied.

"Good. Now listen closely. Keep your circuits open at all times, and don't allow yourself to get out of sight of the others. I don't want anyone getting lost, and it will be easier than you think in these surroundings. Williams, you select two men and scout on ahead. Use your hand-radar and light-beams. Report at once if any of you sight an amoeba. The rest of us will follow with the equipment."

A jumble of voices filled the radio as the men sorted themselves into their proper places. As the noise died down, the Third Mate's voice sounded, calling the captain.

"Skipper! Cantor, Frenesi and I are ready to move out! Any last words?"

"Yeah." Hudek slipped a suit-enclosed arm around one of the metal cages and, stooping awkwardly, picked up a case of paralysis bombs with his other hand. He had been dubious about their usefulness under water and now wondered fleetingly if amoebas had enough nervous system to be affected by them.

"Okay, men—Let's go! We all have sufficient oxygen for about eight hours, so we'll head away from the *'Cuss* for no more than three hours. After that, we'll start circling back to the ship."

He stepped away.

The space-suited figures moved laboriously through the blue-green water, pushing aside the clinging masses of floating vegetation. A depressing, eerie silence filled each metal suit. Every now and then a grunt would sound from one of the men carrying the bulky equipment, or a curse, coming from someone trying to extricate a boot from the thick silt underfoot, would crackle through the phones.

It was slow going and, after two hours of steady plodding, the hunting party had barely covered half a mile. They'd seen oysters with long, stalk-like legs, floating seaweed that bore thorns and roses, and they had fought off ferocious three-headed sharks, but the scouts had not

managed to contact a single amoeba.

Hudek was beginning to wonder if they were at the wrong depth for amoebas, or if the giant, one-celled animals were scarce and only inhabited one tiny section of the immense sea that covered Teardrop, when Frenesi's voice sounded, loud and triumphant.

"Thar she blows! Quick, somebody! What am I supposed to do? It's oozing out of my hands!"

At the first sound of his voice, Williams and Cantor converged on Frenesi. The amoeba, formless and barely visible in the darkness, eddied uncertainly between the three men, doing its best to avoid the light-beams.

Hudek plunged toward them through the water, making a mental note that the amoebas were photophobic. It was the first real bit of knowledge he had about them. As he arrived, the amoeba flowed swiftly between Williams and Frenesi. It had escaped the scouts, but was heading straight for Hudek!

He swung his cage in front of him and the amoeba entered blindly. Hudek clapped the cage-opening shut and yelled for the men to bring the other cage. The one he had caught the monster with was made of closely woven wire strands, the tiny holes between wires necessary

to permit easy handling of the cage in water. Even as Hudek shouted for the solid-walled trap, a needle-thin pseudopod issued from one of the holes of the cage he was holding. He swore as he watched the pseudopod widen quickly as the rest of the amoeba's body flowed into it.

Dropping the useless cage, Hudek threw one of the paralysis bombs after the retreating blob. If the bomb affected the amoeba at all, it certainly didn't slow the creature down. By the time the other men reached Hudek, the amoeba had disappeared into the gloom.

Lord Glanders was leaning casually against the mess-hall bulkhead, ignoring the scowls addressed to him by Chief Engineer McGill and Third Mate Williams, and dissecting, with obvious enjoyment, Captain Hudek's abilities and intelligence.

"For two days now, *Captain Hudek*," the sarcasm dripped from Lord Glanders' voice, "you've been trying to capture a mindless, one-celled beast. You and I may have had our differences, but I'd always assumed there was something to your reputation of being able to carry out an assignment. Apparently I was wrong. How long do you expect to continue with this

childish ineptitude? One would think—"

Hudek leaped to his feet, snarling.

"Damn you, we've done everything that could be done! We've used every mechanical contrivance known to man, and invented a few of our own! My men and I are trying to catch something no one else has ever caught, but at least we go out there and try! You sit comfortably on the ship, afraid to risk your own hide, while we—"

Hudek stopped as Lord Glanders straightened stiffly.

"Captain Hudek, you will have a space suit in readiness for me tomorrow when you go out on the hunt. I'll not have an Emp lecturing me on courage!"

He turned on his heel and strode out of the mess hall.

The three officers watched him leave and, when he was safely out, McGill groaned theatrically.

"Now you've done it, Skipper! As if we didn't have trouble enough, that misbegotten Supe is gonna come tagging along on the hunt! We won't even be able to snag a minnow!"

Hudek grinned. "Take it easy, Mac. I wanted to get him outside. I think I've figured out a way to solve all our problems!" He was strangely confident.

McGill looked up, surprised. "Don't tell me you took my ad-

vice, and decided to rub the old boy out!"

"You'll find out soon enough, Mac. The important thing right now is that you both understand exactly what you're each supposed to do tomorrow. There mustn't be any slips!"

Carefully, Hudek outlined his instructions to the two men.

Lord Glanders was having difficulty controlling the fear in his voice. "Wha-what is the plan of operations for today, Captain Hudek?"

Hudek felt a brief pang of sympathy for the man. The first time in a spacesuit was always a disturbing experience. It made a person feel completely alone, completely cut off from the rest of humanity. And the underwater environment was certainly terrifying in itself, particularly to a man who had always been surrounded by servants and comfortable, familiar conditions. Then Hudek remembered the danger that Lord Glanders represented for the men of the *Spartacus*, and thrust all sympathy from his mind.

"Three men have been out beating the water for an amoeba for almost an hour now," Hudek said. "The one thing we've learned about amoebas on this planet is that they tend, whenever possible, to avoid light. As

soon as they find one, the men will use their helmet beams to drive it in the direction of the *Spartacus*. The rest of us will wait here and try to capture it when it arrives."

Lord Glanders' beam focused on the open cargo airlock.

"Then what? The rest of us will try to drive it into the airlock?"

"We've tried that," Hudek answered. "Along with that negative phototropism I mentioned, these amoebas have a strong tendency to avoid enclosed spaces. I managed to get one into a cage for a moment, but we haven't been able to repeat that."

His helmet beam centered on a tube-like affair two crewmen were holding in readiness near Hudek and Lord Glanders.

"I've had the machine shop rig up this compressed-air harpoon. We're trying it today for the first time. When the head of the harpoon hits the amoeba, a mass of stiff wire will spread out in all directions. The person who hurls it will be attached to the other end by a long rope. The harpoon won't hold the amoeba too long, but it might slow the creature down long enough for us to get a cage around it. If the idea works, I suppose that, legally, whoever throws the harpoon would be

considered the one who caught the amoeba. I wonder if you'd care to be the one, Lord Glanders?" Hudek tried to keep a casual tone to his voice; everything depended on Lord Glanders' acceptance.

"Good idea, Hudek. If it works, I might be disposed to reconsider my intentions once we get back—"

Lord Glanders' voice was drowned out by the shouts of the men stationed outside the *Spartacus*. All light beams were upon a large amoeba swimming erratically before the beams of the three beaters.

Hudek galvanized into action. "Keep your beams off it, men! You'll drive it away from the ship! Try to channel it this way!"

Unceremoniously, he shoved Lord Glanders up to the harpoon. He could hear the Supe chattering with the fear inspired by the sight of the amorphous creature.

"Steady, man," he said harshly, tying the loose end of the harpoon's rope around Lord Glanders' spacesuited wrist. "When I give the signal, shoot; then play the amoeba like a fish on a line. We'll do the rest. Now!"

Lord Glanders snapped the trigger mechanism and the harpoon boiled through the water

and struck the oncoming amoeba. For a moment, the creature hesitated, trying to pull away, drawing the line taut. The resistance seemed to change the amoeba's non-existent mind. The line grew slack again as the amoeba began to ooze up it, right toward the Supe, imprisoned at the other end!

Lord Glanders' shriek crescendoed upward, filling Hudek's helmet with ear-shattering noise. "Hudek! It's coming after me! The rope is tied to me! What'll I do?"

Hudek had to scream to make himself heard. "Quick! Head for the cargo lock! It's your only chance!"

Clumsily, the Supe turned and thrashed through the water in the direction of the open port. The rope stretched out behind him, and the amoeba, ever narrowing the distance between itself and the man, was pulled along in his wake.

As soon as the two had entered the opening, Hudek shouted, "Okay, Mac, seal the lock!"

Without waiting to see if his orders had been obeyed, Hudek charged into the regular passenger airlock. He waited impatiently for the water to drain out of the lock, trying not to listen to the bubbling screams of Lord Glanders.

"It's chasing me! Somebody do

something, please! It's beginning to swallow me—"

Hudek ripped off his helmet, cutting off the sound of the Supe's voice. He tore down the corridors of the *Spartacus*, heading for the cargo hold.

McGill was busy at the controls of the cargo lock, a scowl darkening his features. He looked up when Hudek entered the hold, but refused to meet the captain's eyes.

"That's pretty filthy treatment, Skipper, even for a Supe—"

Hudek interrupted him impatiently.

"Never mind that now, Mac! Have you emptied the lock? Good! Open it up—fast!"

The inner port began to swing open. Hudek grabbed up a solid-walled, transparent plastic cage, which had been placed in readiness near the lock. Motioning to McGill to follow him he leaped into the airlock. He heard McGill gasp behind him.

The spacesuit containing Lord Glanders leaned against the wall of the airlock. At his feet, the quiescent amoeba formed an ankle-high puddle.

Ignoring the man, Hudek began scooping the amoeba into the container. Even with McGill helping, it took time. It was like picking up a tremendous, viscous egg.

Finally, all of the creature inside, Hudek closed the cage and the two men carried it out into the cargo hold. Hudek attached a hose to a valve on one side of the cage, and sea water began gurgling into it. McGill adjusted the dials at the cage's base, giving the amoeba the gravity and pressure it was accustomed to.

It was not until the cage was filled with water and the amoeba had started twitching back to life, that Hudek turned his attention to Lord Glanders, who had remained motionless throughout the operations.

The two officers stripped off the spacesuit. Lord Glanders was alive, but completely unconscious. They propped him up against the side of the amoeba's cage, and Hudek dropped to the floorplates with a sigh of profound relief.

McGill's temper rose as he watched the captain leisurely light a cigarette. When he could contain himself no longer, he burst out with, "All right, Abner, let's have it! What was the big idea of the whole thing?"

Hudek looked at him with mock surprise. "What's wrong, Mac? We captured one amoeba, as per agreement, that's all."

McGill gestured toward the Supe. "What about him?"

Hudek shrugged. "He was

never in danger. If he'd stopped to think for a moment, he'd have realized that an amoeba couldn't harm a man in a spacesuit. He was probably too scared to remember he had one on. All the books say giant amoebas couldn't exist because gravity and an inability to take in enough oxygen for their size would render them immobile on Earth. I figured that if we could get one out of his normal environment into Earth conditions, it would become a flat jelly pancake, and it did."

He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"The trouble was finding some way to get him on board. I was pretty sure Lord Glanders would break and run for the ship, once he met an amoeba face to face, so to speak. All I had to do was make sure the amoeba followed him. The harpoon took care of that."

Hudek chuckled. "You know, Lord Glanders really deserves all the credit for the capture. Back on Earth, he told me to try roping or smothering the amoeba, and I really followed his advice!"

"Very amusing." Lord Glanders was awake. His voice was weak and uncertain, but it steadied as he drew on his tattered pride.

"It will be even more amusing, Captain Hudek, to watch you

writhing in my personal correction pits, once we're on Earth!"

Hudek blew a smoke ring at the angry Supe. "Terry!" he called, "you can come out now!"

The Third Mate's grinning features emerged from the observation recess over the cargo lock, used normally to examine cargo as it was being brought on board. He swung down to the floorplates, carefully cradling in his arms a mass of visual and aural recording equipment.

"Did you get it all?" Hudek asked.

"Every quiver and syllable," the Third Mate told him, proudly exhibiting rolls of film and wire.

Hudek twisted onto his side so that he was facing Lord Glanders.

"There it is," Hudek said. "Those records will be off the ship and in a safe place the moment we hit Earth. If you start any trouble for the crew of the *Spartacus*, those recordings go straight to Baron Welk. It will make your name a standing joke in every palace of the Twenty Companies. What do you say we call it quits?"

Lord Glanders straightened stiffly and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. His face took on an unhealthy mottled cast and one hand groped blindly for the top of the

amoeba's cage. He examined the faces of the men before him and the un pitying hatred in their eyes made him flinch as from a physical blow.

He turned and walked away from them, out of the cargo lock, his shoes thumping hollowly on the floorplates. McGill began to laugh before the Supe was out of earshot, and Williams joined him loudly. Lord Glanders continued to walk, his aristocratic shoulders giving no indication that he heard the laughter, but he stumbled once, slightly, as he turned into the passageway to the main corridor.

Hudek lay on his back, still complacently blowing smoke rings.

"Looks like we've got him where we want him, boys."

He ground his cigarette out against the side of the transparent cage. He grinned at its occupant, who was eddying uncertainly around the confines of his prison.

"Lord Glanders is going to come across handsomely for this baby. I have a feeling that the next trip the *Cuss* makes will be with our people on board. Better not burn those plans for the colony, Mac; looks like we'll be using them after all!"

He rose lazily to his feet.

"Back to your posts, men. Up ship!"