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**BRING BACK
MY BRAIN!**

by Dwight V. Swain



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From the depths of infinity came a menace so dreadful Clark Dane could not comprehend the danger. Yet his subconscious knew, crying out:

Bring Back My Brain!

by

Dwight V. Swain

IT WAS A WORLD without a past or future; a shining shadow-world borne of sheer madness, a thousand echoing eter-

nities beyond all space and time.

Now the pulsing radiance grew brighter—so bright it sent pain-tipped needles stabbing through

Clark Dane's brain. He writhed under its relentless, throbbing pressure; tried to draw back, to cry out.

But the strange lethargy still clung to him, all-encumbering as a leaden pall. As in a nightmare, he lay prostrate, paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

Numbly, he wondered if he were dead.

Only then the silent laughter rose again - - taunting; chilling - - and he knew that life still stirred within him.

The face came with the laughter, floating through the swirling radiance as a shadow drifts through fog. Hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed, hairless as a sand-scoured, tide-washed skull, it hovered before Dane like a living death's-head, closer than ever before.

Where previously had he known this Being-Without-A-Name, Dane wondered? What malicious trick of circumstance had brought the two of them together?

Only those were things somehow beyond his powers of recall at the moment; questions that, strangely, seemed to find no answers within his aching brain.

Shuddering, he squeezed the eyes of his mind tight shut against the spectre.

But the face would not go away. Smirking, sardonic, evil, deep-

lined with old sins, it hung motionless now, as if mocking Dane in his torment while it reiterated its eternal theme: "I am your master, slave! Bow down! Bow down to your creator! Acknowledge your serfdom here and now!"

In spite of himself, Dane cringed. "Say it, you fool! Say you are my slave!"

"No, damn you! Never; not ever . . ."

"You dare not deny me! You know it!" The malevolent eyes in the death's-head skull gleamed hot and bright as fire-jewels - - probing, penetrating, skewering to the core of Dane's very brain. "Say it, I tell you! Say you are my slave!"

Dane's jaws ached with pressure. Desperately, he tried to fight the nightmare image from his mind.

"Acknowledge me, slave! I am your master!"

Dane's senses reeled. He was panting now. "I - - I - -"

"Say it!"

"I - - am - - your slave . . ."

Thin, cruel lips peeled back from stained teeth in a grimace of sadistic triumph. The soundless, soulless laughter rang forth louder than ever.

Dane sobbed aloud.

As if his reaction were a signal, the mocking face began to fade, back into the eddying radiance from whence it came. Where it had

hung, a new shape rose.

Inanimate, this one; yet clean-cut and graceful as any living thing. Slim, silvery, needle-sharp, it poised like a gigantic lance flung skyward from its squat, buttressed base.

Dane's raw nerves calmed a fraction. The dream-pain ebbed away. Fascinated, he studied the shining shaft.

For even as he first glimpsed it, he knew in a rush that his life, his fate, his very being, somehow were linked tight to it. Completely strange to him, it yet held intangible elements of familiarity beyond all ordinary knowledge.

Now the shaft seemed to drift closer, just as had the face before it, and Dane saw that a vertical slot ran almost its full length, from top to bottom, like a vastly-elongated needle-eye.

Slowly, while Dane watched, the shaft turned above its base. A second slot appeared, precisely like the first. Then a third. Through the openings, Dane glimpsed a maze of coils and wiring.

Frowning in spite of himself, he glanced down at the base, then stiffened.

For the shaft hung completely free in the air as if invisibly suspended from above, well clear of the metal-rimmed socket in its bed-plate!

A chill ran through Dane. Yet he could not tear his eyes away from the shining needle. It was almost as if another unheard voice, soundless as that of the vanished face, were hammering thoughts into his brain: "Heed well, Clark Dane! Let no detail escape you, lest the lack of it shall speed you to your doom! This shaft - - it stands as symbol of all your dreams and hopes, your destiny . . ."

Then thought and image alike were fading; the face and its mind-voice back once more: "Remember, slave, I am your master, now and always! Dare to challenge me again and instant death shall be your doom!"

Never had the hollow eyes gleamed with such menace. Never had the bony, hairless face been etched more deeply with lines that spoke of ruthlessness and iniquity.

Slowly, reluctantly, Dane bowed his head. "I am your slave. You are my master."

But deep within him another voice was speaking in a savage, sullen whisper, so low as not even to reach the frontal lobes of his brain: "No! I'm not your slave! No man's my master! And some day, no matter what you threaten - - some day, we'll see who dies!"

AT FIRST IT SEEMED to Dane that he was racing through space, hurtling out in a whirling, swirling arc that left the whole solar system far behind. The stars, the galaxies, fell into chaos in his wake. New nebulae spread out before him, unseen by living eye until his advent.

Awe-struck, unable even to breathe, he could only stare at it all in unnerved wonder.

Then, slowly, that stage passed. Little by little, the void about him took on substance, until at last he found himself swimming somewhere far beneath the surface of a viscid sea . . . fighting his way upward through the horror of dark, chimera-teeming depths inches at a time in that agonizing, snail-slow progression known only in the world of dreams.

But there came a moment when even swimming demanded too much effort. He floated, limp, rising slowly towards the daylight miles above him, free to the whim of every changing eddy of a foam-flecked, pale-green sea.

As from afar, then, a voice reached him dimly - - a real voice, this time; one that spoke words aloud and face to face instead of only in the mind.

A woman's voice, surprisingly. "I want him at the Record Center as fast as I can get him here,"

the voice said firmly. "That's why I'm coming out from Mars to make the pickup. There hasn't been a genuine case of amnesia reported from any of the inner planets in over a hundred years, and I've no intention of letting this one slip by me."

Of a sudden the pale-green sea seemed to separate beneath Dane. It left him stranded on a smooth, level surface, resilient and not too hard.

Cautiously, he moved his fingers over it, recognized the texture of heavy synthetic kalor.

A bed, then.

The woman's voice went on, brisk and businesslike yet somehow intense: "I can't impress all of you too much with how important it is not to upset this man. Any shock prior to the complete celloscopic and hypnoanalytic examination we'll give him here might do untold damage - - both to him, and to our chance of successfully working through his case."

Very carefully, Dane opened his eyes.

He looked out upon a dully glittering expanse of green telonium spaceship bulkhead. The viewing plate of a built-in visiscreen occupied a spot directly before him at eye level.

Centered on the plate was the image of the woman who was

speaking.

Narrow-eyed, Dane studied her.

She had turned now to a concise discussion of technical details regarding amnesia -- and that made the contrast between her words and her appearance all the more marked. For even over the visiscreen there was no denying her lithe, slender loveliness; and as Dane gazed up at the smooth oval of her face . . . stared into her cool grey eyes . . . he could visualize her in almost any role more easily than that of scientist or savant.

If he ever met her, perhaps he could persuade her to play a more feminine part.

It was a pleasant thought. But even as it struck Dane, the woman broke off. Her soft lips parted in a sudden, half-rueful smile. "I'm talking too much. You've better things to do than listen to my lectures, and - -"

THE CLICK of a switch cut her off in mid-sentence. A harsh male voice snarled, "I'll say she talks too much! And for my part, I'm all through listening."

Dane shifted quickly; discovered for the first time that he shared the telonium chamber with three men grouped about a table: two in space-fleet uniform and one - - the speaker - - without.

The ununiformed man, squat

and heavy-bodied, still gripped the visiscreen's remote control switch, his piggyish, close-set eyes glazed hard with anger, his broad, lumpy face working.

The pig-eyes flicked to Dane as he turned. The lumpy face split in an ugly grin. "Well! Sleeping beauty's awake! Maybe we can come up with some answers of our own after all, before her royal highness from the Record Center gets here."

The man surged up as he spoke, flexing corded arms thick with coarse black hair. To Dane, he looked to be in his late twenties. His body bulged so heavy with muscle that his half-bald bullet head seemed to grow directly from his shoulders.

But one of the space-fleet officers rose too. "Hold it, Pfaff!" he rapped. "Nelva Guthrie's given us our orders - - and whether you like it or not, she's supervisor of the whole Mars Record Center. In a situation like this that gives her the rank to make what she says stick."

"Oh, does it, now?" sneered the man called Pfaff. "Personally, I always thought that where the Kalquoi were concerned, Security outranked anyone."

"The Kalquoi - -?" The second space-fleet officer was on his feet now, gesturing. "Slow down a min-

ute on that, Pfaff. What have the Kalquoi got to do with this poor devil?"

"We picked him off an asteroid, didn't we?" the bullet-headed Pfaff slashed back belligerently. "If that doesn't tie him to the Kalquoi, what would it take? They've infiltrated the whole damn' belt, and you know it!"

"But just because he was marooned there - -"

"Marooned, hell!" Pfaff hammered the butt of a rock-like fist against the doloid table. "Who marooned him, that's what I want to know! No man just pops up on an asteroid, naked as the day he was born, without even a breather mask for company!"

The two officers exchanged help-less glances.

"Answer me, you chitzas!" Pfaff bellowed. Again he smashed his great fist down upon the table. "I want to know who marooned him! And after you've told me that, I want to know who sent out the distress signal on him that we picked up. And who pumped that cave full of air and then slapped an energy seal on it so he'd have something to breathe till we got there. And finally, who" - - a momentary pause while he snatched up an object from the table - - "who left him this Kalquoi yat-stick to play with?"

"Well - -" The first space-fleet officer groped futilely for words.

The second looked away, not speaking.

For a long moment Pfaff watched them - - pig eyes aglitter, bullet head drawn far between the massive shoulders.

Then, slowly, his snarl changed to a smirk. He straightened; made a show of smoothing his rumpled short-sleeved, civilian tunic.

"For my money," he announced in a suddenly bland and unctuous voice "we've got no evidence whatever that this starbo" - - a gesture to Dane - - "is even human!"

In spite of himself, Dane went rigid. The officers' heads snapped round as if on springs. "What - -?"

"You heard me." Pfaff was almost purring now. "The Kalquoi are shape-shifters; you know that. That's what makes them so dangerous. One minute, they'll be obviously alien - - crystals floating in mid-air and radiating colored light like so many prisms. The next, one's a rock, another's a tal-string, and the third's bouncing around pretending to be the ball in a byul-game."

A THIN THREAD of irritation began to creep through Dane. Unsteadily, he pulled himself to a sitting position and swung his legs over the edge of his cot. "Wait a

minute, there - -"

"Shut up, you stabat!" Pfaff threw out the command in the manner of a huecco-trainer addressing a particularly doltish pupil. And then, to the officers once more: "Don't you see? The brain-drain's stopped the Kalquoi cold. But supposing they could masquerade as humans, the way they do inanimate objects! Before we knew it, they'd take over the inner planets, the way they have the outer!"

Dane drew a deep, careful breath. "The only trouble is, I'm not a Kalquoi," he announced firmly.

"Oh," This time Pfaff turned to face him. "Then who are you, may I ask?"

"My name's Clark Dane."

"Clark Dane. Very good." Pfaff licked thick lips, as if enjoying the whole situation. "Now, tell us some other things: where you were born; who your parents were; your work assignment number; occupational classification; residence registration; how and why you came to be on the asteroid where we found you."

"Why, I - -" Dane started to speak, then stopped short, groping. "I - - I . . ."

"Yes, yes. Go on." Pfaff was grinning openly now, head thrust forward as he prodded.

A numbness crept through Dane. Desperately, he searched the far-

thest corners of his brain for answers to the other's questions.

Answers that just weren't there.

Pfaff chuckled; goaded: "It couldn't be you don't know, could it? Nor that you can't remember anything about the past except your name?"

Dane didn't answer. Bewilderment; confusion; sheer, stark panic - - they roiled within him; put knots in the pit of his stomach and made his head' reel till he had to cling to the edge of the cot for fear of falling.

Again Pfaff chuckled. "Maybe I'm being too hard on you, Dane." His mockery seared like acid. "If so, I'll apologize. Just prove to me you're not a Kalquoi; that's all I ask."

"Damn it, Pfaff!" the officer nearest to Dane exploded. "You heard what Nelva Guthrie said: any shock's liable to tie this man up permanently. Quit plaguing him!"

Pfaff's air of mock-cordiality fell away like a discarded mask. "Is that an order, lieutenant?" he demanded belligerently. "Are you telling me what I can and can't do?"

The other's lips drew tight. "Now wait a minute, Pfaff - -"

"No! You wait!" Pfaff thrust his bullet head forward, close to the officer's face. "This is a matter of principle, mister. We'll set-

tle it right now. I'm Security rep on this ship, and I say this Clark Dane pickup's a Security matter. Are you going to contradict me?"

"If need be." The lieutenant's cheeks flamed. "It so happens, Mr. Pfaff, that you've pushed your luck a little too far. Security rep or not, you're overstepping your authority, and I'm not about to stand for it. If need be, I'll take it clear to the captain."

"Well! So it's out in the open at last!" Pig eyes glittering, thick lips twisted in an ugly grin, Pfaff moved in even closer. "You've got a good idea there, too - - that business of taking all this to the captain. We'll do it. And then, after that, we'll carry it another step, to a friend of mine. You may have heard of him. His name's Thorburg Jessup."

"Thorburg Jessup - -!" The lieutenant's nostrils flared. His eyes distended.

Then, of a sudden, the angry color was draining from his face. Uncertainly, he fell back a step. "Now wait a minute, Pfaff - -"

IT WAS AS IF the other hadn't even heard him. "Did you think you were going to get away with it, lieutenant? Did you really?" The Security rep exploded in a roar of contemptuous, scorn-ringing laughter. "Let me tell you

something, mister. The blocked-promotion stations are full of brass-braided jackasses who thought they could lock horns with Security reps. Because the minute an officer talks back or pokes his nose into Security business, the rep calls Jessup - - and that's the end of the trouble *and* the officer."

For a long, taut moment, then, the silence echoed; a leaden silence, heavy with tension.

"Well, lieutenant?" Pfaff cocked his head. "Which is it going to be? Do you shut up - - or do I call Thorburg Jessup?"

The spaceship officer seemed to stop breathing. Then, abruptly, he pivoted and, wordless, stalked from the room.

Not speaking, Pfaff turned his cold, unblinking stare upon the second officer.

The man's gaze faltered; fell. He followed his fellow from the chamber.

Now Pfaff swung round to face Dane, lumpy features aglow with unholy triumph. Slowly, contemptively, he scrubbed a meaty palm back and forth through the coarse black hair that matted the opposite forearm.

It made a whispering, scratching sort of sound that rasped Dane's nerves worse than all the earlier verbal pyrotechnics. Uneasily, he shifted; swallowed.

Because strive as he might, he still couldn't remember. Not anything.

The realization brought with it a feeling more frightening than anything he'd ever known. It was as if the world - - his private world - - had vanished, leaving him cast adrift in space blindfolded, without landmarks or triangulation points, all orientation lost.

The sense of helplessness that came with it was almost more than he could bear. Sheer lack of knowledge half-paralyzed him. Desperately, he wondered what he should do; how his role and true identity called for him to react.

Still gloating, Pfaff leaned back; rested his heavy hams against the doloid table. "Well, bucko?" he prodded.

With an effort, Dane held his voice steady. "I can't tell you what I don't know. All those questions - - I simply don't remember."

"Nor this thing? You don't remember it, either?"

As he spoke, the Security rep picked up the Kalquoi yat-stick from the table and held it out for Dane's inspection.

Frowning, Dane studied it. A good foot long, Earth measurement, and purplish in hue, it was formed of some heavy alien metal. The basic outline was that of a slingshot crotch - - a sort of han-

dle that forked into two prongs to form a Y. But a bar across the top closed the fork, and a continuation of the handle came up to meet the bar at right angles, making a T. Bracing members from the point where the stem of the T met the crosspiece ran to the middle of each arm of the Y, then in their turn were joined into a triangle by another crosspiece.

With a little imagination, Dane saw, it would be easy enough to vision the unit in its entirety as forming a word or syllable, YAT.

"It's a funny thing," Pfaff observed with an emphasis anything but mirthful. "No one knows just what these gadgets are for. The best the extraterrestrial ethnologists can come up with is a lot of thes-gas about symbolism and religious significance. That stuff I wouldn't know about. But one thing's for sure: where you find yat-sticks, you find Kalquoi."

Dane made no comment.

"This one," Pfaff pressed, extending the yat-stick, "was lying half under you in that cave where we picked you up."

Dane shrugged.

"That's all you've got to say? You won't tell me any more about it?"

"What can I tell you?" Dane came back wearily. "Don't you understand? I don't know. I can't

remember."

The Security rep's broad face drew into a chill, expressionless mask. His bullet head sank deeper between his shoulders.

"All right," he clipped harshly, flinging the yat-stick back down upon the table. "You want it hard, I'll give it to you that way. This is a survey ship. Start talking, or I'll have 'em throw you in the bem-tank."

"The bem-tank - -?" Dane stared.

"Don't give me that! You know what I mean! Survey ships bring in samples of extraterrestrial life - - the kind of bug-eyed monsters that give a man nightmares even to think about. What they do to you if they get the chance shouldn't happen to a quontab."

A chill ran through Dane. "But I don't know - -"

"Tell it to the bems!" Already, Pfaff was jamming his thumb down on a buzzer button. "You had your chance, you stabat! Now we'll play it my way. You and the narcoanalyst and that vidal Nelva Guthrie - - you'll see who's got the answers!"

Dane's panic was like a light-lance beam twisting in his midriff. "Please - -!" he choked. "Please . . ."

Pfaff laughed aloud.

DANE STOPPED SHORT in mid-breath. The goading, the mockery, the pig eyes, the harsh voice, the badgering - - all these he'd taken.

But the laugh went one step beyond his limit of endurance.

In the fraction of a second his panic turned to roiling, boiling rage.

What did it matter if he didn't know who he was or from whence he came? Why should he care if his past was a blank, his future a question-mark?

Why indeed - - so long as for this one moment he had a course to follow!

Such a course as erasing the grin from Pfaff's thick lips, for example.

And after that - - well, he'd play the other moments as they came along, without regard for past or future.

Savagely, then, he lunged up from the cot, straight at the still-laughing Pfaff.

For the barest instant the Security rep stood frozen, eyes blank with startlement. Then, with surprising agility for his heavy-bodied bulk, the man tried to twist aside, out of the way of Dane's rush.

His hip hit the doloid table. He stumbled.

Before he could recover, Dane smashed a fist home to the blubbery lips; felt them spurt blood as

they crushed against Pfaff's teeth.

The Security rep reeled. Heart surging with fierce elation, Dane followed up, hammering home a rain of blows to head and body alike.

For an instant the other fell back - - head down, hairy arms hugged close to protect the bulging belly.

But only for an instant. Then, with a harsh roar, the bullet head came up again. A fist like a maul swept out in a wide arc, bruising Dane's rib-cage. Another blow caught his shoulders; rocked him back on his heels.

Desperately, Dane threw himself sidewise, barely clear of the other's lunge, and let fly a rabbit-punch.

It landed solidly, but it was still a waste of effort. Pfaff spun about with no sign that he had even been hit, and once again, lunged for Dane.

Taking advantage of his longer reach, Dane drove in a quick one-two to Pfaff's face, then started to leap back, away from the other's charge.

But this time it was he who forgot the doloid table. Careening against it, he staggered for a moment off balance.

The next instant Pfaff buried a fist in the pit of Dane's belly. Retching, half-paralyzed, Dane lurched backward; slumped to the

floor.

A roar of triumph from Pfaff. He launched a kick powered to break a man's back.

With a tremendous heave, Dane writhed clear just in time.

But already the Security man was kicking again - - a bruising, thigh-grazing blow that tore a choked cry from Dane's throat. In desperation he rolled back and under the table, hoping against hope to avoid the other's murderous feet.

Cursing, Pfaff heaved at the table, wrenching the nearest leg clear of its anchor bracket. "You chitza!" he panted, "I'll kill you! D'you hear me? I'll kill you!"

He meant it. It showed in every line and corded, bulging muscle. Stark murder gleamed in his tiny, close-set pig eyes . . . glistened in the flecks of bloody foam at the mouth-corners and in the sweat-greased folds of the contorted face.

Spasmodically, Dane dragged himself to his feet on the far side of the wrenched, warped table.

Panting, Pfaff tried to reach him; then, failing, clawed for the heavy Kalquoi yat-stick that still lay on the slab between them.

With all his might, Dane heaved at the already-sagging table. The yat-stick slid to the floor on his side.

Pfaff hurled himself after it

bodily. Jamming him aside, Dane snatched up the stick and swung it in a tight arc, straight for the base of the Security rep's skull.

Pfaff twisted and it hit - - snapped - - a collarbone instead.

In the same instant the chamber's door swung open. Two space-fleet guards gaped across the threshold.

Face twisted with pain, clutching at his shattered clavicle, Pfaff roared, "Get this stabat!"

DANE LUNGED for the doorway, swinging the yat-stick. It clipped the first guard alongside the jaw; dropped him in his tracks. Dane stiff-armed the second and sprinted off down the passage-way.

But as he ran, alarm bells all about began to jangle. Ahead, a spaceman appeared as if from nowhere, paralyzer at the ready.

Dane veered into the first cross-passage; dropped down a pneumolift to the next level.

More green telonium walls. More bells and guards and paralyzers.

Lurching now, staggering, Dane stumbled onward. It was as if his body were acting independently, without his mind's volition, for intelligence told him flatly that there would be, could be, no escape. Not in a closed unit like a spaceship.

Yet here he was, still fleeing.

Why? Why?

Laughing, he downed another guard with the yat-stick; and even in his own ears his mirth rang a drunken note.

Another pneumolift. Another. And after that, a long, dim-lighted passage.

Dead end.

So this was where they'd trap him.

Only then, as he slumped to the floor, he stubbed his toe on a heavy screw-lock; saw at last the scarlet-lidded hatch on which he squatted.

One more barrier to put behind him.

Wearily, he wrenched the screw-locks open; pried up the spring catch; lifted the hatch-lid; peered down into the space beneath it.

An unpleasant, faintly musty odor. A wall-ladder leading down into pale grey emptiness.

Yat-stick still in hand, Dane lowered himself gingerly through the hatchway and let the heavy scarlet lit fall to above him, wondering as he did so why it was painted so bright a red.

The spring catch clicked into place. No going back now.

Down the ladder, a rung at a time. Ten feet. Fifteen. Twenty.

Solid decking again. Solid . . . yet strangely slippery. And the unpleasant musty smell was stronger now, too.

Something brushed Dane's hand. Something gelatinous and clammy.

Instinctively, he jerked back.

His eyes were adjusting to the pale grey light now. He could see better.

He wished he couldn't.

Because the thing that had brushed his hand . . . the slimy, gelatinous thing that now was making the flesh crawl over every inch of his body . . . was a monstrous, many-eyed, pseudopodal horror he couldn't even classify.

But it could classify him, apparently; for already its amoeboid protrusions were eddying in close to his feet with tiny, obscene sucking noises.

Heart pounding, blood chilling, Dane gripped the yat-stick till his knuckles ached. At last - - at last he knew why that hatch-lid overhead had been painted such a vivid scarlet.

It led into the spaceship's bemtank!

CHAPTER III

EVEN AS THE REALIZATION of where he stood at last burst upon Dane with full, nerve-shattering force, the creature confronting him moved forward, closing in about him in a half-moon arc that reached from wall to wall. How large it was, Dane could only

guess, for it extended farther into the dimness than he could see, piling up in great, semi-transparent folds almost as high as his head in places, like some monstrous, shapeless jellyfish speckled with eyespots.

Now, while Dane watched, rigid, the creature put forth another pseudopod. Stickily, the protuberance crept along the metal tank-wall, closer and closer.

A trickle of icy sweat rilled down Dane's spine. Numb, shallow-breathed, he drew back from the advancing tentacle of protoplasm.

In the same instant a chill, moist, odorous Something spewed onto the back of Dane's neck and shoulders; another pseudopod, moving in while the first held his attention.

With a wild yell, Dane lunged for the ladder; tried to claw his way up it.

But the pseudopod clung to him like some loathesome growth, part of him. Before he could tear free of it, the living wall about him swept in, a tide of protoplasm that in seconds mired him to the ankles . . . the knees . . . the waist . . .

Dane shrieked aloud. New strength flooded through him, born of sheer terror. Frantically, he lashed out with the yat-stick, flailing this way and that at the encroaching extraterrestrial horror that any moment now might swal-

low him completely.

But to no avail. Here and there where he struck, the monster's jelly-like tissue quivered a little under impact. That was all.

And still it oozed higher about him. It was to his chest now. His armpits.

Abruptly, Dane stopped flailing. What was the point of it, as things stood now? The best he could hope for was a quick and easy death.

Yet what a place to die, after all his efforts! Here, sealed away in a spaceship's bern-tank! Chances were no one would ever so much as find his body, nor any clue as to what had happened to him.

Which would be a joke of sorts on Pfaff . . . something to try to account for to Nelva Guthrie and his own superiors.

No doubt it would baffle the other man too, Dane decided - - the Being-Without-A-Name, the mind-talker who'd spent so much time and effort trying to force subservience upon him.

Or did that strange hairless, hollow-eyed, fiend-faced man even exist? Thinking back over everything, Dane couldn't help but wonder. In retrospect, a nightmare quality clung to the whole incident, as if perhaps it were delusion, hallucination, rather than reality.

In any case, it didn't matter, because now, dying here, he'd never

know.

And that was too bad, in a way, because there were so many things Dane knew in his heart he'd like to have uncovered. Things like the secret of his own identity, his past and future . . . the meaning of the shining shaft he'd seen and that he knew was somehow bound close to his own destiny . . . the business of the Kalquoi yat-stick, and how it came to be in the bleak asteroidal cave where the survey ship had found him.

The gelatinous mass had reached his neck now. It wouldn't be much longer.

Dane laughed harshly. "Come on, damn it! Get it over with!" He wrenched his right arm free; hurled the yat-stick out into the center of the viscid mass attacking him.

The ooze crept to his chin. Time stood still, every second dragging out to an eternity.

Dane closed his eyes.

As if it were a signal, a rhythm seemed to start up in his brain: *Dane . . . Dane . . . Dane . . .*

His own name, endlessly repeated. The beginning of a death-throe madness, perhaps, Dane decided with a queer sense of abstraction.

Like magic, the pattern changed: *John Dane . . . John Dane . . . John Dane . . .*

In spite of himself, Dane felt a quick-glowing spark of interest. Almost without volition, he spoke aloud: "Not John Dane. Clark Dane."

The rhythm in his brain faltered; broke. In its place came a vague uneasiness, a restless groping: *Clark Dane - -? Clark Dane? No, no. John Dane. JOHN Dane!*

"CLARK Dane," Dane reiterated firmly.

INSTANTLY, the previous uneasiness returned, but multiplied a hundred-fold. Needles of pain shot through his brain. The pale grey emptiness of his prison vanished in a blaze of purple light. Even the gelatinous sea of protoplasm enveloping Dane seemed to transmit a sudden shiver.

Dane opened his eyes.

But the purple light was no pain-born illusion. Rather, it glinted even brighter now than before.

Its source was a crystal . . . a strange, radiant crystal that floated before Dane in mid-air.

Now, while he watched, the purple light changed to green; then red; then yellow.

The crystal, too, was changing. Before his eyes, it writhed and stretched until it was a glowing aquamarine ladder, modeled after the one down which Dane had come into the bem-tank.

A moment later it was a bright blue bottle; then a cerise cube; then once again a crystal, orange and golden.

And all the time, the turmoil in Dane's brain continued . . . a chaotic, inarticulate fumbling, based on some point of confusion between the two names, *John* and *Clark*.

But despite the pain, Dane hardly noticed the groping and the searching. He had mind only for the colored light and changing shape of the weird crystal that hovered before him.

For there was only one thing it could be: a Kalquoi, one of those dreaded alien invaders who'd long since usurped the outer planets, beyond the asteroid belt.

Now it was here, on this ship, headed straight for Mars!

And there was nothing he could do about it.

As if to emphasize the point, the amoeboid monster in whose grip he lay pushed a new pseudopod down upon Dane's head and face. Oozing, enveloping, smothering, it pressed into every pore and orifice.

Dane gasped for breath that would not come. Choking, jerking, convulsing, he struggled against the mucilaginous mass that held him.

It was like fighting quicksand. The creature would not let him go.

Fire raced through Dane's lungs. Black fog rose, clouding his consciousness. He forgot who he was, and where he was, and even the pulsing pain of the Kalquoi's sentient probings.

Slowly, then faster and faster, he began to fall . . . to fall . . .

Only then, of a sudden, his mouth and nose, his face, were clear again. Spasmodically, Dane sucked air into his lungs in great, anguished gasps.

When his knees gave way, he slumped to the slime-slick floor.

It dawned on him dimly, then, that the monster had left him . . . that he was free and safe once more.

Why?

Still not quite steady, he looked out across the bem-tank; saw the protoplasmic horror huddled in a quaking, quivering mass against the chamber's far wall. The Kalquoi hovered above it; and when the giant amoeba-thing made a tentative effort to ooze back in Dane's direction, the alien assailed it with sudden, darting light-beams that seared deep into the pseudopodal creature's tissue.

The demonstration was enough for Dane: the Kalquoi had saved him.

But again, why?

It was a question without an an-

swer - - or, at least, with no answer Dane himself could fathom. Besides, for now, it was enough that he remained alive. Puzzles could come later.

Meanwhile - -

But before he could organize the thought, sound came into the tank's stillness: the creak of screw-locks turning; the clink of a spring catch released.

For the barest instant the Kalquoi hovered as if listening. Then, like a candle snuffed out, it vanished.

Dane surged to his feet. Darting across the slippery decking, he found the yat-stick and, snatching it up, stuffed it out of sight beneath his tunic.

Simultaneously, a sudden draft told him the hatch was open. Light blazed - - a brilliant beam that pinned Dane, half-blinded, to the tank's wall.

Yet in spite of his situation, he could not repress a momentary grin. It would be worth a good deal of discomfort just to watch Pfaff's reaction when he found victim alive and monster cowed!

Then a guard called down to Dane, ordering him up the ladder and out of the tank. Brief minutes later, two other spacemen escorted him to the threshold of a room ornate enough for Dane to assume that it must be the captain's office.

THE DOOR-GUARD ordered a halt. Beyond him, Dane could glimpse Pfaff, standing inside the office. But the Security rep's whole manner proved a disappointment. Far from ranting, he wore an air of sullen, savage, inadequately-repressed fury. The thick, bruised lips were drawn tight, the bullet head tilted forward a fraction as if to avoid someone's gaze.

Then the guard pushed Dane forward again, and he saw the reason for the Security man's manner.

For Nelva Guthrie and the spaceship's captain stood side by side across from Pfaff. The officer, bland-faced, stared toward the far corner of the ceiling, and Dane interpreted the way the man's mouth twisted to mean that this was a moment long anticipated and thoroughly savored.

But no trace of amusement showed in Nelva Guthrie's pale, lovely face. Eyes blazing, she lanced barbed words straight at Pfaff: " - - and so, in spite of the protests of this ship's officers, you intentionally and maliciously violated my orders, Mr. Pfaff?"

Muttered incoherence.

"Answer me, Mr. Pfaff!"

"Not maliciously, I said."

"Oh, really, Mr. Pfaff?" Nelva Guthrie's grey eyes sparked. The ash blonde hair rippled as she

tossed her head in a quick, impatient movement. "What would you call it, then, when you abuse a man to the point that he takes refuge in a bem-tank, after I've particularly emphasized it's vital not to upset him?"

A mumble.

"Speak up, Mr. Pfaff!"

"All right, I will!" All at once the other seemed to have lost all control over his temper. The massive shoulders hunched forward; the lumpy face thrust out, bold and belligerent, in the manner of the Pfaff whom Dane remembered. "I wanted to know how come this chitza got stranded on that asteroid. I still do, and I'm going to find out, even with you here."

"Indeed?"

"You bet indeed! You think Security moves over for every little bobtailed slazot out of Records? I'm rep on this ship, and I'm labeling this whole business as Security jurisdiction! You don't like it, you can state your case to Thorburg Jessup!"

Color came to the girl's cheeks. Her voice, icy calm, dropped even lower than before. "How old do you think I am, Mr. Pfaff?"

"How old - -?" The Security rep stared; stumbled. "How should I know? What's that got to do with this?"

"You'll see. Meanwhile, please

make an estimate."

"Well . . . maybe twenty-five."

"You're quite close. I'm twenty-six."

"So?"

"So how many twenty-six-year-old women do you know who are supervisors of planetary record centers?"

Pfaff's mouth opened, then closed again with no word uttered.

Nelva Guthrie said, "Some men, Mr. Pfaff, might deduce from this that such a woman has certain - - contacts."

The Security agent still held his silence.

"In my case," the girl went on, "the contacts are more than adequate." A slight tightening of the lips. "Mr. Jessup no doubt will tell you all about it when he calls you."

Pfaff's broad face went suddenly slack. The close-set eyes drew down to gimlets. "What do you mean, damn you?"

"I mean you've finally overreached yourself, Mr. Pfaff," Nelva Guthrie retorted icily. "Devotion to duty's one thing, self-glorification another. Not even Security will back a man who's so eager for advancement as to endanger a vital project in the remote hope he can bully his way through to personal credit."

"But - - Jessup - -"

"Why would he call you, you

mean?" Nelva Guthrie looked the image of wide-eyed innocence.

"Why, to relieve you, of course, Mr. Pfaff. Orders are already cleared for your suspension as Security rep for an indefinite period. You unload as soon as the ship ramps down on Mars."

Finality on a level that forbade dispute or question was in the girl's voice and manner. She turned from Pfaff; faced Dane for the first time.

It was a strange moment for him. For as he looked into her eyes, in that first fraction of a second, he saw things paradoxical, things wholly unexpected . . . discernment, warmth, concern, a tender questioning.

It rocked Dane back, almost unbelieving.

Then the moment faded, as if a blind had snapped shut somewhere behind the clear grey eyes. Smiling, yet brisk and businesslike, Nelva crossed to him and extended a slim, firm hand. "Mr. Dane, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you. The Mars Record Center definitely considers itself fortunate to have the opportunity to study your case at first hand."

Wryly, Dane matched her smile. "I'm hardly uninterested myself."

"The sooner we get to it, the better, then. My carrier's waiting."

Nelva's smile was ever so bright.

Yet looking from her to the bland-faced spaceship captain and sullen-eyed, hate-glowing Pfaff, Dane felt a sudden, swift wave of uneasiness.

This business - - somehow, it was all too neatly organized, too smooth.

But there was nothing he could do about it. Not now; not till he knew more.

"All right with me," he shrugged. "Let's go."

Did the blind behind Nelva's eyes flicker for the barest instant? He wondered.

"Good!" Impulsively, it seemed, she caught his hand. "This way - -"

Wordless, taut-nerved, looking neither to right nor left, Dane walked with her from the room.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS QUIET, here in Nelva Guthrie's office in the Record Center. She said, "It takes a few minutes for the cell-sheets to come through, Mr. Dane, and I know you must be tired. Why don't you lie down on the couch while we're waiting?"

"Thanks. I will." Gratefully, Dane stretched out; drank in the cool greens and soft blues of the decor. The climatizer's rhythmic whisper lulled him.

Yet restful though it all was,

complete relaxation somehow would not come. In spite of all his efforts, Dane found himself heir to twitching muscles, sudden tensings. Half a dozen times, he caught himself watching Nelva sidewise as she checked through a pile of papers, as if he were afraid to leave her unobserved.

Why? Because he felt drawn to her as a woman? Because he feared that she might slip away?

Or, because the contrast between the mask of distance she now wore, as compared to the things he'd seen when their eyes first met, was so marked as to make him permanently wary, unwilling to trust her?

The thought set irritation pricking at him. Abruptly, he sat up. "It's no use."

"To try to rest, you mean, when you don't know who you are or where you come from?"

"That's right." Dane spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Why should I be the first man in more than a hundred years to have this happen to him? You said yourself amnesia's been wiped out."

"True enough," the woman nodded, ash-blond hair shimmering. "In your case, however, some rather unusual factors complicate the picture."

Dane frowned. "What kind of factors?"

For a long moment Nelva studied him, as if debating. Then, at last, she said, "I guess there's no real harm in telling you. The reason we know you're a victim of amnesia is because the survey ship's psychman ran a narcoanalysis on you. And what you thought was a perception test, downstairs here, was really a hypnoanalysis to check the psychman's findings."

"So?"

"The results were most interesting. For one thing, you didn't respond to treatment. Amnesia's an adaptive reaction to inner conflict, a sort of hysterical inhibition. When the inhibition's released by the Egrisanto technique, under deep analysis, ordinarily the block to memory goes with it, and recall returns." Nelva ran a slim forefinger along the edge of her papers; eyed Dane. "Do you follow me?"

Dane nodded slowly. "I think so."

"Then you'll understand how it startled me when I found no trace of any real inhibition, no sensitive areas you were trying to protect." Nelva spread her hands. "As a matter of fact you reacted freely on every subject covered by the standard tests. And you showed a rather remarkable fund of information on virtually every topic."

Dane gaped. "Then what - -?"

"Don't you see? You're holding

back nothing - - yet there's not even the slightest hint as to where that knowledge came from! It's almost as if you were a robot, with built-in reaction patterns and knowledge tapes instead of a human brain."

A chill ran through Dane. He sat very still.

What was it the fiend-faced man, the Being-Without-A-Name, had said to him in those first delirious moments of his awareness that now seemed so long ago? - - "Bow down to your creator?"

Involuntarily, Dane shuddered.

Nelva said, "You're thinking about your dream, aren't you? About how the man said he'd created you?" Her voice was warm with sympathy.

Dane looked up sharply. "How did you know - -?"

"Simple logic. The analysis gave me all the things in your mind - - about the man with the hairless skull who was your master, and the silver needle, and the Kalquoi. When I mentioned robots, it was almost certain to make you think about - - the man."

"Oh."

"You don't need to worry, either. You're not a robot. Robots don't have feelings. Besides, the celloscope would have shown it if you were. As for the rest - - the shaft the Kalquoi - - I imagine they're

some sort of delusion. Tied in with your amnesia, perhaps - - specialized situations the standard tests weren't geared to touch."

"I see." Dane studied his knuckles.

Yet what did he see? What, really? He wondered.

Certainly not that the fiend-faced man and the silver needle and the Kalquoi were delusions!

For as Nelva talked, her words had come faster and faster. A new note had crept into her voice - - a note of tension. And now, as he watched her obliquely, he became acutely aware that her fingers were all at once ever so restless. Her lips showed a minute tendency to tremble, also, and the grey eyes stayed clear of him, as if the things she said were creating some undercurrent of conflict in her that she feared to let him see.

DANE'S JAW tightened. Breathing carefully, evenly, he thought back once again to the way the girl had first looked at him - - and then, how the blinds had come down, shutting him out.

How could he trust this woman, while that hidden barrier in her eyes still stood between them? How dared he throw aside all suspicion, all caution, so long as she held back secrets?

No; at root the dilemma still

was his, and always would be. Not even Nelva Guthrie could share it with him. He had no choice but to go his own road, fight through to his private destiny.

And what better time to start than now?

Tight-lipped, he said, "All this is fine. But it looks to me like it's going in a circle."

Nelva's hands moved nervously. Her eyes opened a trifle wider than seemed normal. "A circle - -?"

"You claim I've got amnesia, don't you? Only then you tell me I don't react right for it." Dane laughed, harsh and curt. "To me, that says we're getting nowhere."

A knock broke off the conversation. Quickly, as if relieved at the interruption, Nelva crossed the room and opened the door.

A uniformed tech held out a plastic cylinder. "Here's that cell-sheet, Miss Guthrie."

"Good!" There was an air of relief in the way Nelva said it. She turned to Dane; gestured triumphantly with the cylinder. "This is the answer to your problems, Clark! Your cellemental analysis sheet! Come on!"

Shrugging, Dane fell in beside her. He wondered wryly how he had so suddenly been promoted to first-name status.

Nelva was still talking: "A cell-sheet's proof positive of identity,

Clark. By Federation law, one's made for every human at birth, everywhere among the inner planets. All records on that person then are filed under the cell-sheet's pattern. So you won't be a lost soul much longer. Two minutes after we put this cylinder into the interplanetary index system, we'll know everything there is to know about you . . ."

They were in another room now - - a long, narrow room through which busy techs hurried. The walls on either side were banked solid, floor to ceiling, with varicolored index flashers. A black, box-like unit, shoulder-high, occupied the center of the floor. Beyond it, at the room's far end, double doors like those through which Dane and Nelva had just entered provided a second exit.

"This way," Nelva commanded briskly. Leading Dane to the box-like unit, she flipped open one of a row of hinged cases lining each edge, fitted Dane's cell-sheet onto a spool, closed the lid once more, and pressed a button.

She kept up a running fire of small-talk as she worked. It came out just a trifle too animated. Dane decided her primary purpose was to forestall embarrassing questions rather than to convey data.

Now she pointed to a slot below the cylinder-spool. "This is the

place, Clark. And in just two minutes!"

In spite of himself, Dane couldn't tear his eyes from the slot.

Seconds, ticking by . . . dragging out to what seemed eons . . .

Then a bell rang, a single sharp, imperative note. A card spilled from the slot.

It seemed to Dane for an instant as if Nelva had stiffened. A nearby tech looked up sharply.

But already Nelva's hand was darting out. Deftly, she caught the card before it reached the tray and, turning, studied it. Whether by accident or design, her body shielded the record so Dane couldn't see it. When he would have stepped round her, she flipped the card over and stood scrutinizing the punch-marks and code-symbols on the reverse side.

With an effort, Dane held his voice level. "Well? What does it say?"

"Say - -? Oh, it - - it tells the file we have to send to for your records."

But Nelva's voice shook. Her face had paled. Tight-lipped, Dane body-blocked her against the machine and snatched the card from her; turned it over.

The legend's top line was printed in red letters a good inch tall:

NO RECORD

And then, smaller, beneath it:

HOLD SUBJECT IN TOP SECURITY ISOLATION PENDING INTENSIVE INVESTIGATION AND APPROPRIATE TESTS FOR PSYCHOPATHY, CRIMINALITY, AND/OR POSSIBLE KALQUOI CONNECTIONS.

CHAPTER V

WORDS ON A CARD. That was all they were. But they spelled an end to hope.

Numbly, Dane looked at Nelva. White to the lips, she dodged his gaze.

But beyond her, over by the door through which they'd entered, a man who wore a guard's uniform had suddenly appeared and now stood to one side, scanning the index-chamber.

While Dane watched, two more guards joined the first.

Dane crowded close to Nelva. His words came out a raw whisper: "Those guards - - are they after me?"

She didn't answer.

Dane's belly knotted. His hands shook.

But he couldn't afford the luxury of cracking. Not now, of all times.

No. The only course open now was to follow desperation's dictates.

Psychopath? Criminal? Kalquoi agent?

If those were his labels, he might as well live up to them!

Grimly, he let his hand brush the heavy yat-stick still concealed beneath his tunic; forced his face into the caricature of a grin as he gazed at Nelva.

The girl seemed scarcely to be breathing.

Dane said softly, "We're getting out of this place. You and me, together. We're going to walk through the entry door at the far end of this room. Understand?"

Nelva's eyes distended, wide with sudden panic. Her mouth started to open.

Dane caught her wrist in a savage grip; twisted so sharply she came forward on tiptoe, face drawn with pain. "Scream and I'll break your arm!"

Only the faintest flicker of Nelva's lids indicated that she'd heard him. But she turned as he did under the pressure on her wrist and moved with him in the direction of the doorway.

Behind them, a loud voice cried, "Hey, there!"

Dane flung a quick glance back; glimpsed the guards starting towards him.

With a curse, he shoved Nelva forward, ahead of him, in a frantic dash for the door.

They made it in a rush. Heeling the panel shut in the faces of his pursuers, Dane wheeled right down the corridor.

But even as he turned, he came face to face with yet another guard, charging up the hall straight at him.

Savagely, Dane flung Nelva aside. Clawing out the yat-stick, he smashed its heavy head to the pit of the man's stomach.

The guard bent double. Bowling him out of the way, Dane pivoted, braced for attack or flight alike.

Yet to what end? In his heart, he knew it would be the same here as on the spaceship. Sooner or later, his adversaries would hunt him down; trap him . . .

Then, off to his left, a voice cried, "Clark! This way - -!"

Nelva's voice.

Dane whirled; glimpsed the girl beckoning frantically from an alcove. Sprinting to her, he crowded past a door that she held open, and into a cramped, shadowy chamber beyond.

"Now, here . . ." Nelva's hand caught his, leading him onward.

Another door. Another. A room piled high with stored furniture and equipment.

Nelva said, "You can hide here for a little while. After that . . ." Her voice trailed off. She was

breathing hard.

Dane said, "I'm tired of hiding. It gets me nowhere."

The girl's grey eyes widened. "But - - what - -?"

"Which way to your analytical computer?"

"Analytical computer - -?" Nelva looked bewildered. "What computer? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I mean!" Dane bared his teeth. "Every planetary record center's built around one. It's the gadget that organizes your information, sorts out your data, makes your decisions when you've got too many complicating factors for a human mind to handle." He laughed harshly. "That's me, right now. I'm up against too many complicating factors. So I'm going to ask your computer for some answers."

NELVA STARED at him incredulously. "Are you mad, Clark? At best, we've a few minutes' freedom for you. No more. Any moment, Security may send someone in here - -"

"That's why I won't wait for them!" Dane came back fiercely. "Sure, you saved my neck, dragging me in here. I'm grateful for it. But not so grateful I'm willing to stand waiting till someone hunts me down." He hammered a clenched

fist into his palm. "No, damn it! I'll do some of the hunting this time. And that starts with some questions for your computer!"

"But what - -?"

"What questions?" Dane laughed again. "Can't you guess? I want to know that man who claimed I was his slave. About the silver needle. The Kalquoi. Who I am; why I can't remember anything; how it is I've no record in your files. Maybe even about you and what you're up to. Things like that, a lot of them."

New lines etched Nelva's lovely face. "Clark, you can't!"

"Can't I?" Dane paced the floor. "Take me there and we'll see whether I can or not!"

"No, no! You don't understand." Nelva's hands moved in a gesture of frustration. "It's just not that easy to use an analytical computer."

Dane stopped his pacing. He frowned. "How's that?"

"For one thing, the machine's self-limiting. It covers only certain areas of information, likely to be needed here on Mars. But your questions aren't localized."

"Give me an example."

"The Kalquoi. They're a menace to all the inner planets, not just Mars. So when you ask about them, the only answer our machine will give you is a referral to the big System Computer on Luna."

"Go on."

"Even setting up a question properly can take weeks. You have to be sure it's framed within the machine's limitations. Take this man you talk about. I wouldn't begin to know how to key a query on him, with nothing to start from but your verbal description of an emotionalized visual image."

"I see."

"It's the same with the silver needle. How do you classify it - - as art, armament, or industrial equipment?"

Dane nodded slowly. "You make a good case, Nelva." And then: "But I'll still have a try at it. Let's go!"

The girl stared at him, and before his eyes the shreds of her earlier composure vanished. "Clark, I won't let you do it!"

Wordless, Dane reached for her arm.

She didn't even try to jerk back. Her words came in a rush: "Clark, you don't understand! Security keeps guards on all computers - - a special unit of Thorburg Jessup's private zombies. They'd capture you or kill you before you even got close to the question boards - -"

"That would make a difference to you?"

"Can I say it any plainer?" The girl's lips trembled. She caught

Dane's hand between hers. "I won't let them get you, Clark! I won't! That's why I'm telling you these things; why I've tried to help you. We'll find some place to hide you, somehow, where even Security can't find you - -"

"Sorry, Nelva." Dane shook his head. "I'm not fool enough to think I can hide from Security, even if I wanted to. And as for what you say about the computer - - well, this is my day to see things for myself."

Nelva drew back. Her nostrils were flaring, yet she seemed closer to tears than anger. "You don't trust me!"

"That's right. I don't." Dane made it flat and brutal.

"But I - - I've helped you . . ."

"Right again. But the way things stack up, I'm not sure why. So till I know for sure, I'll play it my way." Dane bit down hard, fighting down all impulses to warmth and tenderness. "We'll have a look at that computer now."

"Clark, wait - -!"

"Well?"

"You won't have to go to the computer. I - - I'll tell you - -"

Nelva broke off raggedly. She was breathing too fast, and her eyes held a strange, wild look.

Dane stared. "You'll tell me what?"

"About the silver shaft, the needle. That's the only one of your questions I know anything about." The girl came up against him; clung to him, her face an anguished mask. "I wasn't lying about the computer, either, Clark. It is guarded by those awful creatures Jessup's biochemists have bred in the Mercury labs. You wouldn't stand a chance against them. That's why I couldn't let you go there. They're completely ruthless - - all duty conditioning, not a trace of human feeling in any of them - -"

"Forget about that!" Dane gripped her arms. "Tell me about the shaft. That's what I want to know!"

"It's - - it's on Callisto . . ."

"Callisto - -?" Dane stared. "That's Kalquoi territory, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course. They occupied it when they took over the outer planets thirty years ago."

"Then the shaft - -"

" - - is a relic of the days just before the occupation," Nelva finished for Dane. "It was a weapon, Clark - - a weapon set up at Sandoz, the chief human city on Callisto. The Sandoz Shaft, they called it. Only then it didn't work, so people ended up saying it was the Sandoz Tombstone. It's mentioned in all the Kalquoi Invasion knowledge tapes. That's how I know about it."

PRICKLES OF EXCITEMENT ran up and down Dane's spine. For the first time he began to feel as if he were making progress, coming to grips with the mysteries which seemed ever to surround him.

"Do you know any more about the thing?" he demanded of Nelva. "How was it supposed to work? What went wrong?"

The girl's smooth brow furrowed in concentration. "As I recall, the shaft was nothing but a gigantic Udellian transmitter."

"A Udellian transmitter - -?"

"Yes. Back when the Kalquoi first came to our system, someone discovered that high-frequency Udellian waves kept them from changing shape or swallowing up things. And if the amplification was strong enough, the waves would even shatter the crystals, the Kalquoi bodies. That was the whole idea behind the shaft: to destroy the Kalquoi if they tried to attack Sandoz."

"And what happened?"

Nelva shrugged slim shoulders. "I'm not enough of a tech in that field to tell you, really. But as I understand it, it turned out that the shaft was one of those things that works fine when you hold the size down to a laboratory model."

"But when they increased the size it wouldn't work?"

"That's right," Nelva nodded. "It seems that when the transmitter got beyond a certain size, the amount of power it took climbed 'way out of proportion - - so much so the available broadcast relay equipment couldn't even activate the shaft, let alone make it effective against the Kalquoi."

"So?"

"So the Kalquoi came, and Sandoz - - all Callisto - - was abandoned." Nelva lifted her hands in a small, sad gesture. "That's all I know, Clark. Every bit."

Dane nodded slowly.

Nelva said, "I'm afraid that's the way it may turn out with all your questions. There won't be any answers - - not real answers; not the kind that can help you. That's why I'm so anxious to see to it Security doesn't find you."

Dane pondered her words for a long, dragging moment. Finally he asked, "Where's that carrier you picked me up in?"

The girl shot him a quick glance. "The carrier - -?" And then: "Why, on the roof here, I guess. But of course it's just short-range - -"

"Do you think we could get to it?"

"Perhaps." Nelva studied him thoughtfully. "Surely you're not really thinking of trying to get away from Security in a carrier, are you?"

Dane grinned, a trifle thinly. "You never can quite tell about me, can you?" He let the grin develop into a chuckle. "How do we get up there, anyhow?"

"There's a pneumolift. Right through this door . . ." But though Nelva led the way, a shadow lay across her face that might have been irritation, or bafflement, or both.

It was strangely quiet in the building, it seemed to Dane. Especially considering there was a full-scale Security search for him in progress.

He tried not to think about it. He was tense enough as it was, without letting his imagination run riot.

Obliquely, he stole a glance at Nelva Guthrie, beside him in the lift.

The shadow across her face had vanished. Now the girl seemed almost placid. It was as if, in her eyes, everything was going precisely according to plan.

DANE SMILED to himself a little at the thought . . . wondered how long she'd be able to hold to her complacency.

The pneumolift eased to a halt. Warily, Dane followed Nelva out . . . moved after her through the shadows to the carrier station.

Still no guards, no interruption.

A carrier, poised in its launch-rack, sleek-lined and graceful.

"There it is," Nelva whispered, gesturing. "Just be careful. It can't carry you much beyond the gravitational pull. You may end up playing tag with Phobos and Deimos!"

Dane noted that she stood well back, deep in the cover of the platform-beams.

Brooding, again he studied the carrier, so notably unguarded.

The silence echoed so loud it was making the skin along the back of his neck prickle.

Quite deliberately, then, he crossed to the cargo-ramp, making it a point to follow the shadows, close in to the platform-beams.

A stack of loading-cases stood beside the ramp. Pausing briefly, Dane glanced back to where Nelva still stood craning to watch him.

Then, with no warning, he whirled and threw his whole weight against the high-stacked cases.

For a moment they tottered on the ramp's edge. Then, with a crash like cataclysm incarnate, they tumbled down in an avalanche of ringing metal.

But even as they fell, Dane leaped back into the shadows once again. In a rush, he spanned the distance between him and Nelva.

She stared at him wide-eyed,

mouth agape.

But only for a moment. For then, as water spews from a geyser, the carrier erupted guards - - three of them.

From the level below, too, came the sound of running feet, converging on the cargo ramp.

Beside Dane, Nelva whispered, "What is it? What's happening?"

"A trap." Dane laughed harshly. "But of course you wouldn't know anything about that."

The girl's nostrils flared. "Are you trying to say something?"

For a moment Dane leaned forward, not answering.

Then, as the last of the guards disappeared down the cargo ramp, he spun about, swept the girl up bodily over his shoulder, and headed for the carrier at a dead run.

He was already on the loading ladder before the first shout of discovery arose behind him.

Inside, now. The hatch slammed shut. The launching lever pulled.

A sudden, swift sense of acceleration. Then the easing off as equalizer pressure rose to match it. In the viewer, Mars fell away beneath them.

Dane glanced at Nelva Guthrie.

She stood beside him, the lovely oval of her face a study in pallor. Her fingers trembled as she smoothed the ash-blonde hair, and fear

flickered in the grey eyes.

"Clark, where are we going?" Her voice came out a ragged whisper. "Don't you realize they're sure to catch us?"

"Are they?" Dane chuckled grimly.

"Of course. They'll have every landing-platform covered."

Dane laughed again. It was incredible, how well he suddenly felt, all things considered. "Not ours they won't cover!" And then: "Because damn it, we're going straight to Callisto!"

CHAPTER VI

DANE STRETCHED the little carrier's resources to the limit, pushing it as far out from Mars as he could coax it.

Then, at last, when the craft was well established in a satellite orbit, between Phobos and Deimos and beyond all peril from the mother planet's gravitational pull, he cut the power, turned to the emergency distress-call communicator unit, and switched it on.

He knew Nelva's eyes were on him, even before he swung round to face her once again. It pleased him, now baffled she looked. But her lips stayed set in a thin, straight line - - a memento of some of the things he'd said after the take-off - - so he knew she wouldn't

speak till he did.

"All right," he grinned, "what do you give me for our chances now, my dear Miss Mars Record Center Supervisor Guthrie?"

The line of her mouth drew even tighter. So, after a moment, he let drive with another needle: "Or maybe, as an expert on problems and solutions, you don't want to give a dangerous Kalquoi agent like me the benefit of your professional opinion?"

That did it. Dane could see the girl's knuckles whiten. Her eyes flashed, more ice-blue now than grey.

"You're a fool, Clark Dane!" she burst out furiously. "Once that signal's picked up, Security's sure to have patrol ships here within an hour!"

"Maybe." Dane permitted himself the luxury of grim humor.

"No maybe! You know it's true!"

"Or, maybe not," Dane went on, with no heed to Nelva's interruption. "It might even be Security won't pay the first bit of attention to it." He shot a sidelong glance at the girl. "Would you like to ask me why?"

A moment of obvious, barely-repressed fury. Then: "Why?"

"Because not even a Kalquoi agent would be fool enough to try to get clear of Mars in a four-place

carrier." Dane leaned back; stretched. "No; Security's not going to be looking up here for us. Not when they've got all those landing-platforms down below to cover."

It did him good to see the way Nelva's jaw slackened.

"Of course," he observed wryly, "that opens up another question, too, doesn't it?"

"Another question - -?"

"Yes, you know: the question about how you and I are going to get to Callisto."

The last of the anger-lines vanished from Nelva's lovely face. Her lips parted, breathless with interest. "Tell me, Clark! Have you really devised a way to do it?"

"I think so." Dane paused, letting the moment's tension build up. And then: "Only of course that's no sign I'll tell you about it and give you a chance to sour it."

As knife-twisting, it came off very satisfactorily. Nelva's face went white as if he'd slapped it. Her eyes turned blank, hurt-emptied.

Inside, Dane cringed a little. Of a sudden he felt cheap, ashamed he'd resorted to such pettiness even in anger. Miserably, he turned to the viewer and rotated its field, searching the void about him.

But before he could so much

as complete the circuit, the proximity magnetron's gong tolled brassily. Whipping round the viewer's field in the indicated direction, Dane discovered the cylindrical bulk of a cargo ship wheeling towards the carrier. While he watched, the pickup bay's gate slid back. Receiver racks swung out and clamped onto the smaller craft, then retracted once more, lifting the carrier into the yawning bay as the gate slid closed.

Dane ran his tongue along lips gone suddenly dry.

But now it was too late to turn back. Pushing up from his seat, he stepped quickly across to Nelva.

Something in his gaze must have warned her. Eyes wide with panic, she tried to jump up and scramble clear.

Timing his blow with cool deliberation, Dane drove a hard right to the point of her jaw.

The girl's head snapped back. She crumpled with an unhinged limpness that almost made Dane ill.

But com-box blared in the same instant: "Carrier! What's your trouble? Can you open your hatches or shall we cut our way in?"

It broke Dane's spell. Snapping on the carrier's box, he bent close: "I've got a girl aboard here. She's hurt pretty bad. You'd better come prepared to take her off. As to the how and why of it all - - well, prob-

ably the best thing would be to have your captain come in first and look it over."

"The captain - -!" The spaceship's amplifier squawked protestingly. "Listen, mister - -"

"To hell with that! You listen!" Dane tried to match the harsh belligerence of the performance Pfaff, the Security rep, had given aboard the survey ship. "I've got the kind of trouble here it's going to take top rank to handle, and I'm not going to waste time talking about it, either. Just see that your captain's the first man to come aboard this carrier. If he's not, I won't take responsibility for anything that happens - - and plenty will, believe me!"

DANE SNAPPED off the carrier's com-box as he finished. Wryly, he wondered what the spaceship's officers would conjure up as being the situation aboard the carrier. Certainly he'd given them no grounds for peace of mind!

But now it was time for him to prepare to receive the captain. Taking the yat-stick from beneath his tunic, he wrapped it hastily in loose plastic strips torn from the carrier's sleeper sheaths till it made a bundle about the same size and shape as his own head.

Then a knocking at the hatch told him his visitor had arrived.

Gripping the bundle containing the yat-stick firmly beneath his arm, Dane levered open the hatch-cover and looked out gravely at the little knot of men who stood waiting on the spaceship's transfer platform. "Which one of you's the captain?"

A tall, thin, horse-faced officer with coarse grey hair, protruding eyes and an uncertain manner gestured diffidently. "Well, I am. Einar Helstrom. Captain Helstrom, that is . . ."

"Good." Dane tried to look even more solemn than before. "Captain, this is the kind of emergency that's for your eyes alone. I wouldn't want to expose anyone else to it till you've passed judgment."

He stepped aside as he spoke. After a moment's uncertainty and nervous shifting from foot to foot, Captain Helstrom in his turn swung aboard and uneasily stepped down into the carrier's passenger compartment.

As he did so, Nelva Guthrie moaned.

The captain tripped over his own feet getting to one side. Eyes seeming to protrude even more than usual, he peered down at the prostrate girl, then turned to Dane. "What - - what is it? What's the matter?"

Dane shrugged. "A little fainting spell. She'll be all right in a few

minutes. But this" - - a brief pause while he held out the package containing the yat-stick . . . "is something else again."

Captain Helstrom eyed the package fearfully. "What's in it?"

Dane returned the bundle to its place tight-clamped beneath his arm before answering. Then, quite deliberately and with an almost academic manner, he asked, "Captain, do you know what a proton grenade is?"

"A proton grenade - -!" The captain's jaw dropped, lengthening his face so that he looked more like a horse than ever. "Not those things they tried out against the Kalquoi once, you don't mean? Not the ones that could tear a whole ship apart from just a little hand-bomb?"

He backed away with little teetering steps as he spoke, halting only when he bumped against the wall of the carrier's cabin.

"That's right," Dane nodded. "Have you ever seen one?" And then, shoving forward the yat-stick package and stripping away the outer layer of plastic till the T's crossbar was revealed: "See, here's the trigger-release mechanism - -"

"Please, mister!" Helstrom croaked, bony hands spread as he tried to push Dane back. "Please, I don't want to see nothing. Noth-

ing!"

"Well, if you don't want to . . ." Scowling irritably, as if disappointed, Dane wadded the plastic back over the end of the yat-stick. "You know who I am, captain?"

"N-no."

"Clark Dane, that's what they call me. Security's after me."

The captain's eyes bugged even further, and his Adam's apple moved up and down. He didn't speak.

Dane went on: "They thought they had me, down on Mars. I got away, though. Dug this" - - he patted his bundle grimly - - "out of a Security arsenal to bring with me."

The horse-face worked. The coarse grey hair appeared close to standing on end.

Dane scowled more ferociously than ever - - as much to keep from laughing himself as to impress the captain. There was something so intrinsically absurd about the whole situation that he knew that one misstep would carry him over into gails of wild, hysterical mirth.

"Captain," he clipped tightly, "how'd you like to have me blow up this ship?"

Whatever it was the captain answered, Dane couldn't understand it. He pressed on: "There's just one way to save yourself, captain. That's to take me where I want to

go. Because even if you hit me from behind - - stun me, kill me - - this grenade will still go off. The trigger's already free. This wrapping's the only thing that's holding it."

The captain gulped - - a hollow, dyseptic sound. "Wh-where do you want to go?" he asked finally.

Dane grinned. "Callisto."

"Callisto!" The grey hair was certainly sticking straight out now. "Mister, why don't you talk about Alpha Centauri or the Coalsack? They'd be every bit as easy!"

"Oh?"

"Security's got the Belt guarded like a vault. They'd brain-drain us before we were half-way through."

"You could set the guides for Callisto before we hit the Belt, couldn't you?"

"A computer-guide ramping on a satellite clear on the other side of the Asteroid Belt, with Jupiter's gravity pull to figure for?" Captain Helstrom shuddered. "Mister, you don't know what you're asking me for. Better to blow up your bomb now and be done with it!"

"Fair enough, if that's the way you feel about it," Dane agreed. He started to unwrap the yat-stick.

As if on springs, Helstrom sprang at him. "No, no, mister! I didn't mean it! We'll go; we'll go!"

Bleakly, Dane nodded. "I

thought you might see it that way. So let's get started. And just for safety's sake, to make sure you don't change your mind - - I'll stay right in your astrogation chamber with you!"

CHAPTER VII

AHEAD, THE BELT began to take form on the visiscreen - - a patternless, ever-shifting array of hundreds of asteroids of every size and shape, all gleaming bright against the black-velvet backdrop of the void as they wheeled slowly through their far-flung orbits.

The vastness of it brought a sense of awe to Clark Dane.

Awe, mixed with despondency and depression.

What chance did one man stand, trying to pick up the thin, tenuous thread of his destiny in this trackless chasm that was outer space? How could he hope to find identity, in a gulf so boundless that whole worlds were forever lost?

He'd been mad even to think - - to dream - - of choosing such a course.

Yet had he really chosen it? Was it truly his own will that had brought him to this moment?

Bleakly, he wondered; and as he did so, the old, infuriating sense of being a pawn in all he did . . . driven by another, larger will . . .

swept over him once more.

Was he really a slave, thrall to the hairless man, the Being-Without-A-Name? Was it some darkly subtle conditioning, rather than his own impulses, that drove him?

Again - - always; forever - - Dane wondered . . .

But now, abruptly, the ship's com-box came to life to interrupt him: "Cargo Vessel 214XB7! Cargo Vessel 214XB7!"

It brought Dane back to the here-and-now - - the cramped, instrument-banked, astrogation chamber of the spaceship. Gripping the yastick package tighter than ever, he tore his eyes from the wonders spread on the visiscreen and once again looked on horse faced Captain Helstrom and pale, silent, tight-lipped Nelva Guthrie.

The com-box blared again: "Cargo Vessel 214XB7! Acknowledge, Cargo Vessel 214XB7!"

"That's us," the grey-haired captain grunted. He started to reach for the switch to the ship's own communicator unit.

Dane caught his arm. "No."

"What - -?" The captain's protruding eyes fixed on Dane uneasily. "You can't just ignore that call, mister. That's a Security blockade station. Stall 'em and they'll throw their brain-drain on you!"

Dane laughed harshly. "They'll do it anyhow, won't they, when

they find we're heading through the Belt?"

The captain's Adam's apple bobbed. His narrow horse-face drew longer than ever. "Well . . . yes, I guess so."

"Get ready for it, then. Set your guides."

"On Callisto . . .?"

"On Callisto."

A shudder ran through the captain. "You ever been brain-drained, mister?"

"No."

"Well, I have, and it ain't fun. You're out of control. Completely."

A tiny chill touched the nape of Dane's neck. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Nelva watching him - - the first hint she'd given that she knew he existed since they'd reached the astrogation chamber.

Once more, the com-box: "What the devil's the matter with you, 214? This is Security talking! We want an acknowledgment right now! You're already into blockade area. Wheel around fast, back away from the Belt, or we'll slap a drain on you!"

Another voice - - this one from the amplifier of the ship's own communications network: "Captain Helstrom! Security's trying to get you! They say you're headed into the Belt! Is something wrong? Your door's locked. We can't get

in to you . . ."

Dane ran his tongue along his lips. He could feel his companions' eyes upon him. The tension in the astrogation chamber was soaring higher every second.

"Cargo Vessel 214XB7, this is a last warning! Acknowledge this call and turn back at once! Failure to comply within thirty seconds will result in disabling dynamoencephalytic action! Repeat, failure to comply within thirty seconds will result in disabling dynamoencephalytic action . . ."

The captain and Nelva Guthrie, staring . . . gleaming pinpoints on a darkened visiscreen . . . a silver shaft and a hairless ghoul who laughed and laughed . . .

Dane sucked in air. "Are your guides set, Captain?"

"Computer guides set." Resignation and despair mixed in the greying officer's voice.

"For Callisto?"

"For Callisto."

Seconds, ticking by. Dane counted them as they passed.

Fifteen to go. Ten. Five. Four. Three. Two. One . . .

Nothing happened. Frowning, Dane started to turn to Helstrom.

IT HIT HIM, then - - a sudden blazing bolt of power that surged and seethed through his brain. Dimly, as from afar, he was

aware that the yat-stick package had slipped from his grasp and fallen to the floor, the truth as to its contents revealed as the plastic covering fell away. For his own part, a strange paralysis seemed to grip him. He stood upright, erect as before; yet it was beyond his power to move a single muscle. Sight and hearing - - he still had them, but with vastly limited acuity. And while his brain still functioned, it seemed to work slowly, painfully, as if laboring under almost more of a burden than it could bear.

The captain and Nelva remained within the far periphery of his vision. Like him, both stayed motionless, frozen in the stance in which the brain-drain had trapped them.

Now Dane focussed on the visiscreen. Moment by moment, it gave him the record of the course the robot-directed spaceship followed. Asteroids loomed, big and small; then disappeared once more.

How long that phase went on, Dane never knew. His sense of time was far too warped to allow for even a reasonably intelligent estimate.

But finally, the last of the asteroids fell away. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the great globe of giant Jupiter moved in from the lower left corner of the

screen.

Numbly, Dane watched and wondered. What, if anything, would he find at Sandoz? Or would the city even be there? No one could say for sure, for no human had set foot on Callisto in the thirty years since it had been abandoned to the Kalquoi.

Only then, before he could even glimpse any of the satellites that swept around Jupiter, a new object flashed onto the visiscreen.

It was close, this one - - so close that if he'd had the power, Dane would have covered his eyes out of sheer panic. Ball-round, the thing at first looked for all the world like a wandering asteroid or, perhaps, a giant meteor.

Yet there was a strange sheen about it; a too-perfect symmetry.

For a long moment, it hovered so close that it occupied almost half of the visiscreen. Then, suddenly, a light blazed from a point close to its perimeter: a tight cone of blinding radiance that turned the whole viewing plate white.

The next instant, the visiscreen went dead.

The lights died, too - - all save the self-contained, dimly-luminous emergency radiation lamps. The rhythmic throbbing of the ventilating system halted also. So did the force drive's heavier beat. A sudden, incredible feeling of lightness

came over Dane. Then his angle of view changed, and he realized that - - unaware - - he'd drifted clear of the floor; was now floating in mid-air. So the artificial gravity was off too.

A numb horror crept through him in the same instant. In his mind he cursed himself for a blind, imperceptive fool.

The thing he'd seen on the now-blank screen was no asteroid or meteor, but a globe-ship, a Kalquoi globe-ship! And the light was some sort of energy-diverting ray that had the power to incapacitate spaceship equipment.

So this was the end of his mad venture: not at Sandoz, not on Callisto, but here, aboard this crippled craft, destined perhaps to drift forever in blackness on the void-tides between the Asteroid Belt and the Outer Worlds.

Dane would have killed himself in that moment, if he could.

But he couldn't even do that. No; he could only hang here in the dimness, paralyzed, somewhere between floor and ceiling, waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . .

But now light crept through the gloom - - a pale, purplish radiance Dane found somehow vaguely familiar.

Then a slight movement of the ship changed his position. His eyes, searching, found the source of

light.

It came from the unforked end of the Kalquoi yat-stick Dane had wrapped in plastic to simulate a proton bomb. While he watched, it grew brighter . . . brighter . . . as if the metal bar were oozing energy the way a fresh-cut spring twig oozes sap.

Now the radiance grew to an eddying, pulsing ball, so intense it lighted up the entire astrogation chamber.

THE NEXT INSTANT there was a sort of soundless snap. Before Dane's eyes, the radiance transformed itself into a glowing crystal that rose and floated in mid-air.

A Kalquoi - -!

There seemed to be no pattern nor rhyme nor reason to the alien's actions. Now it hovered; now it darted. One moment it drifted close to the floor; the next, explored the ceiling.

And all the time it radiated changing shapes and colors: a glistening silver corkscrew . . . the dull grey of a microreel case . . . pale blue ovals that resembled nothing Dane had ever seen.

Then sound came - - the muffled clang of heavy hatch-lids. At once, the Kalquoi moved to the astrogation chamber's door and poised there, apparently waiting.

A moment later the door swung open. Two other aliens joined the first.

The three pulsed and glowed together briefly. Then one detached itself from its fellows and moved in close to Dane.

Immediately, he felt himself permeated by a strange, slightly prickling sensation, as if a slight electric current were being sent through him. Warmth enveloped him. The idea of sleep took on unique appeal.

Now the alien moved towards the door once more; and to Dane's intense surprise, he found himself following, drawn along bodily through the gravitationless ship like a towed target. In a sort of roseate haze - - for fear, as of the moment, seemed to have lost its meaning for him - - he wondered what would happen when he was transferred to the Kalquoi globe-craft. So far as he knew, the aliens themselves had no necessity for breathing, so the odds were against there being any air supply adequate to enable a human to survive.

But instead of moving him to the globe, the alien took him to the carrier in which he'd escaped from Mars; loaded him into it.

A moment later the second Kalquoi appeared, Nelva in tow. In seconds, she was installed in the carrier alongside Dane. Then, as

if by magic, the hatch swung shut, and they were left alone.

Minutes dragged by, a dreary procession.

Then, so abruptly the shock rocked Dane, the paralysis that gripped him vanished. Feeling, the power of movement, flooded back into his body. His brain clicked into high gear, no longer dim nor foggy.

A moment later the carrier's gravity unit came to coughing life. Dane found that once again he had weight and could move about at will.

It brought him a quick surge of relief from inner tension; a sense of control over his situation.

He was glad. He had a feeling he was going to need all such he could get.

Beside him, Nelva Guthrie whispered incredulously, "Clark - -! I can move! The brain-drain - - it's off!"

"Could be," Dane nodded. He felt weak in the knees, just hearing the girl's voice - - partly out of relief to know that she'd survived the ordeal of the brain-drain, partly because she seemed to have forgotten or be overlooking their earlier hostilities.

"Then we must be almost to Callisto!" New excitement crept into Nelva's voice. "That's the only way to explain it, Clark. We must

be so far beyond the blockade stations that their relays are too weak to maintain catatonia!"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? What kind of talk is that?" Nelva's tone suddenly was tinged with irritation. "Can you offer any better explanation?"

"Yes, I think I can," Dane answered thoughtfully. "Especially if you stop to consider that the Kalquoi took over back while the brain-drain still had us stiff as boards."

"Still stiff - -?" Nelva broke off sharply. Her lips trembled as she drew a quick, shallow breath. "Clark, you can't mean it!"

In spite of their plight, Dane couldn't help but smile wryly. "I can't mean what?"

"You know!" The girl's ash-blond hair rippled as if a chill were passing through her. "You can't mean - - that - - the Kalquoi - -"

"- - that the Kalquoi have come up with an answer to the brain-drain?" Dane finished to her. "As a matter of fact, that's just exactly what I think. The way it looks to me, they've licked the thing, a hundred per cent."

Nelva's face was white, her breathing too fast. "But - - Clark - -"

"What's going to happen, you mean?" Dane shook his head. "I

don't know, any more than you do. But one thing's certain: if I'm right, as of this moment all Thorburg Jessup's Security blockade stations on the inner-planet side of the Asteroid Belt are just so much scrap equipment."

The girl stared at him. He couldn't read the things in her grey eyes, and when her lips moved the words came out an incoherent whisper. She covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook with soundless, racking sobs.

A WAVE OF TENDERNESS swept over Dane, so poignant it made his whole throat ache. Taking the girl in his arms, he held her to him, smoothing the soft hair, bracing her shoulders against the sobs.

The tears stopped, after a moment. Nelva raised her head; looked up at him, trying to smile even while her lips still trembled.

Gently, Dane said, "Don't worry, Nelva. We'll make it somehow."

"Don't lie to me, Clark. I know what's going to happen, and it really doesn't matter." The girl's lips still smiled, but a shadow lay across the grey eyes. "Just one thing, though, Clark: I've got to tell you, and you've got to believe me. I've never betrayed you, not ever, even for a moment." A pause.

The grey eyes, falling again. "You see, I've - - I've always loved you, ever since the first, so long ago - - long before you remember. Only I couldn't help you, didn't dare to tell you, even a little . . ."

Dane stood very still. "You . . . didn't dare tell me?"

"No. Because I didn't know enough - - about you; your potential . . ."

"But *what* didn't you dare to tell me?"

Nelva buried her face against his shoulder. Her words came muffled now. "About the things you wanted to know - - who you are, where you came from, the hairless man."

Dane's heart pounded. Silently, savagely, he fought against letting his voice soar with his tension; against drawing his arms too tight about the girl's slim shoulders.

"About the silver needle, too?" he pressed gently.

"No. Not that. I never knew too much about the overall picture; only the one part."

The tension was too great. Dane could stand it no longer. Spasmodically, he gripped Nelva's shoulders. "Then tell me what you do know, damn it! Who am I? How did I get on that asteroid? Why weren't my records in your files?"

"Please, Clark!" Nelva twisted. "I'm going to tell you. I want to. There's no need to hurt me - -"

"Sorry, Nelva." Dane let go of her; turned away, ashamed. "It drives me, Nelva. I've got to know. Everything, everything . . ." He drove his clenched fist savagely into the palm of the other hand.

"I understand, Clark." The girl's hand was on his shoulder now. "You see - -"

The carrier hit something, with an impact that threw them both, sprawling, to the floor.

Dane braced himself for further shocks. When they didn't come, he scrambled up; helped Nelva to her feet.

Before they could more than right themselves, however, the entrance hatch opened. An unfamiliar atmosphere rushed in, strangely scented yet breathable.

Raw-nerved, Dane stumbled to the open door and looked out.

The carrier lay on solid ground, in the shadow of the great Kalquoi globe-ship. An open port indicated that the smaller craft had been dumped unceremoniously from the larger.

Arm about Nelva, Dane turned now and looked off beyond the Kalquoi vessel.

Then, involuntarily, he stiffened. A chill of excitement ran through him. Instantly - - instinctively, almost - - he recognized the scene before him; knew the truth.

They stood upon Callisto!

CHAPTER VIII

THIS WAS SANDOZ, man's last stronghold among all the outer satellites and planets . . . fallen citadel, thirty years abandoned now.

Ruin's hand lay heavy upon it. Crumbling walls, and shattered structures sprawled everywhere, and great saw-leaved, turquoise-blue plants half concealed long stretches of the cracked, disintegrating pavement. Scarcely a building stood staunch and whole.

Yet there was no mistaking the place. For though the last edifice might fall, the city's shining silver shaft still thrust up stark and proud into the sky.

Dane stared at it, fascinated, hardly able to tear his eyes away. It was compulsive, the inner drive he felt to draw still closer to it. Yet even though he recognized it as such, he could not fight it down.

Why did it pull him so - - this strange, sky-spiking needle? Why, in spite of all logic, did the feeling surge so strong in him that his destiny was bound tight to his half-forgotten hope-gone-dead men called the Sandoz Shaft?

But only one segment of his brain kept up the wondering. For in his heart he knew the answer didn't matter. Not when the tie

that linked him to the needle was strong enough to lure him across a million miles and more of void to certain death, here on this alien-fettered world.

Bleakly, he looked across to Nelva, and wished he could be with her in this hour. But the Kalquoi seemed to have rather definite ideas of protocol at this stage, and one of them involved his separation from the girl.

Now, parallel but on opposite sides of what once had been the city's central thoroughfare, Dane and Nelva trudged from the carrier towards the distant shaft. A sort of honor guard of Kalquoi surrounded each of them, directing them in the way they were to go by means of sudden, small, darting beams of light that stung like so many angry insects.

The shaft grew larger as they approached, till Dane was staring up at it in awe. With every step, the compulsive drive he felt to reach the needle grew stronger in him. Nothing else could hold his interest or attention. Once, briefly, he even caught himself wondering why it had seemed so important to him to hear Nelva's answers to his questions; to know his own identity, and that of the fiend-faced man without a name.

As if such could ever matter, when destiny lay at the foot of the

Sandoz Shaft!

They reached what must once have been a small park, now. The street they'd followed ended in it. But mere lack of pavement seemed to mean nothing to the Kalquoi. Unhesitating, they herded their charges on across the open green.

And now, on the far side, Dane caught his breath. Before and below him, a broad natural bowl had been developed into an amphitheatre, back in the days of Callisto's human occupation. The metal-rimmed base of the silver shaft stood in the center of the arena at the bottom.

But even the shaft was as nothing in this moment. For never had Dane looked down on a stranger sight.

For Kalquoi crowded the dish-like hollow, hovering like fireflies among the fallen pillars and shrub-masked seats. Hundreds of them; thousands - - they pulsed and glowed and changed shape amid the ruins, till the amphitheatre itself was transformed into a fantastic fairyland of energy and light.

But his escorts gave him no time for pause or contemplation. Already they were urging him down the nearest aisle to the arena below.

Then, at last, there was an end to his scrambling and stumbling

through the debris. His guards halted him, close by the base of the Sandoz Shaft.

The drive to reach the giant needle boiled in Dane, almost overwhelming. But when he would have tried, a quick flick of light from one of his captors turned him back. He could only stare greedily, drinking in the strangeness of the towering monument with his eyes.

And it was weird enough to hold any man's attention. Just as Dane remembered from his vision, the needle stood unsupported, a silver lance suspended in mid-air, completely clear of base, socket, bedplate.

Studying it here at close range, Dane could see how delicate was its balance. The point quivered visibly where it hung above the socket, dancing like a plastic ball atop an airstream. Vibrations ran the slim length of the needle, till it seemed to turn into a flickering razor-edge of light.

How could it be? A beam of some sort - -?

SOMETHING STUNG Dane's flank, then. The pain stabbed so sharp he whirled by reflex, questions and shaft alike momentarily forgotten.

As he did so, a light-beam flicked at his elbow, flame-hot. His guards were urging him to move-

ment again, prodding him diagonally ahead till he stood directly in front of the shaft, but with his back to it.

Now he saw that Nelva Guthrie, too, had reached the arena. Surrounded by her captors, she stood to the left of the shining needle, just as a moment before he himself had stood to its right.

But the Kalquoi gave him little time for such observation. While he watched, a small group of them moved out into the arena and took places in a semicircle close before him.

Dane's guards fell back before the newcomers. In the seating area up along the amphitheatre's sloping sides, the assembled crystalline, light-emitting aliens eddied closer, glowed brighter. A hush seemed to fall over the hollow. Tension climbed like a spaceship at escape velocity.

Dane stood very still. There was nothing he could do but wait.

Then, suddenly, one of the Kalquoi in the tight arc close before him pulsed vivid scarlet. A familiar impulse leaped into Dane's brain . . . a patterned, rhythmic groping: *John Dane . . . John Dane . . . John Dane . . .*

Dane sighed; tried to concentrate upon his answer: "Not John Dane. Clark Dane. Clark, not John . . ."

From then on, there was tumult and fumbling and confusion. Wordless and incoherent, alien intelligences probed every fold and convolution of Dane's brain.

Out of it all, for Dane, came not words, but feelings; not intelligibility, but insight. Slowly, deep within him, there began to grow the weird panorama of a race so alien man could never hope fully to understand it. A concept took form - - the concept of a life-type composed wholly of radiant energy, without permanent shape or body . . . beings that found their only reason for existence in the acts of shape-building and light emission. In his mind's eye, Dane saw how they replenished their life-force, transmuting into energy whatever convenient objects came to hand.

And because these aliens, these Kalquoi, themselves had no need for bodies or possessions, they'd been unable to conceive that other species might require such things . . . might even be harmed if bodies and possessions were transmuted.

But now, at last, glimmerings of this truth had reached them. They'd begun to see the harm they'd done; were sorry for it.

Would man, in his turn, meet them half-way? If they'd stay clear of him and his possessions and allow him to return to the outer

planets, would he abandon the disconcerting brain-drain that prevented their shape-changing and transmuting? True, the magnetic shield they'd developed protected them from it, after a fashion. But it was a nuisance. If possible they'd prefer to operate without it . . .

Numbly, Dane tried to force his aching brain to function. If only he could find the concepts - -!

He verbalized it, spoke aloud in hope that meaning would somehow come through: "Yes, yes. Man wants peace as you do. He'll go half-way and more - -"

The arc of Kalquoi pulsed approval. All but one.

The others' glow slowly faded.

Instantly, like a bomb bursting, the lone dissenter flared emerald and purple, a radiance so brilliant that Dane reeled back, near-blinded.

His brain reeled, too. For such was the burst of energy the Kalquoi spewed into it that flame seemed to sear at every cell. Dane screamed aloud, writhing in torment.

The flame snuffed out. The pain ebbed slowly. But a message stayed, fire-written: *If all men want peace as you say, why have the others scorned us? Why are you the only one to open your brain to us?*

Dane groped. "The others - -? What others?"

But no coherent answer reached him; only a jumble of fragments and half-impressions. He sensed that the Kalquoi were arguing among themselves while he stood by, forgotten.

As if to prove him correct, his guards now goaded him back to his earlier post to the right of the Sandoz Shaft. Simultaneously, the other group of guards moved Nelva forward to the spot in front of the shining needle where Dane himself had stood.

Swaying a little from the aftermath of pain and mind-fatigue, Dane tried to watch her.

But now, all at once, his compulsion to reach the shaft was again upon him. It was stronger, this time; stronger than ever before. It was all Dane could do to resist it.

Yet resist it he must, for his captors still stood close by, and he had no taste for the sting of the light-beams they flung at him.

GRIMLY, HE CONCEN-
trated on Nelva Guthrie, trying to force himself to think of her instead of the sky-thrust lance so close beside him.

Strain-lines marred the girl's blonde beauty now. Her hair was tangled, her cheeks pale, her lips

trembling.

And yet, for all of that, she was still the loveliest thing Clark Dane had ever seen. The yearning for her gnawed at him like a physical hunger.

Now the interplay of form and color from the line of Kalquoi indicated they were probing her mind. Dane could see her straighten, just a little . . . breathe a fraction faster. Her hands moved, rubbing at the side-melds of her garment as if to scrub sweat from her palms.

More shapes, more colors from the Kalquoi. More signs of tension from Nelva Guthrie. Dane could catch only fragments of the projected thoughts and feelings.

Yet something was wrong. Instinctively, he sensed it. A knot drew tight, deep in his belly. He breathed harder.

To what purpose? No matter what happened, there was nothing he could do. He knew that.

Only - - Nelva - -

He never finished the thought. For abruptly, without warning, the same Kalquoi who minutes before had sent the searing charge through Dane's dazed brain blazed again - - a great flash, orange and white and turquoise. The thought smashed in, so violent that even at this distance - - even though it was directed at Nelva - - the impact made Dane's head reel: *She-creature, you*

close your brain to us! You hold back like the others! You want no peace - -

Nelva's scream came like an agonized, overriding echo. Blindly, she staggered forward, clutching her head between her hands.

But the Kalquoi gave no heed. As if the girl were not there, he deluged the whole area with a raging, searing, tidal wave of energy.

Nelva sagged to her knees. Her cry was the keening of a soul in torment.

It was a trigger to turn a man to utter madness. Spasmodically, Dane started forward.

But there was no way to reach the girl, and in his heart he knew it. Too many Kalquoi, too many light-beams, stood ranged between him and her.

But the shining needle, the Sandoz Shaft - - it was relatively unprotected for the moment - -

Spinning, Dane dived towards it - - low, beneath the level at which his captors hovered.

His shoulder crashed against the heavy, buttressed base. His hands closed on a corroded telonium bar. Tearing it from the litter, he surged up, heedless to the light-beams that stung at his back and sides.

The bar had weight to it. Dane swung it with all his might,

straight at the seemingly empty space between socket and needle-tip.

If only he could upset the delicate balance of forces that held the shaft upright, and bring it crashing down, almost anything might happen!

The blow hit square and true. But to Dane, it was as if he'd struck the bar against a daggad column. Pain shot up his arms, clear to the shoulders. The telonium strip tore from his hands and sailed through the air nearly fifty feet.

Before the bar even hit the ground, a bolt of energy struck Dane. Helpless, hopeless, sobbing with fury at his own inadequacy, he found himself slammed back bodily against the metal rim that girded the shaft's base. His hands clamped to the alloy.

It was a moment completely incredible; a moment beyond all possibility of belief. For as Dane's hands touched the rim, sparks leaped from flesh to metal. His whole body convulsed. Blue flame crackled in a tight sheath round him. Power pulsed through every bone and muscle in a surging tide.

Then sound came - - a high, thin skirl, louder and louder, till Dane thought his eardrums must surely burst.

But the sound still welled and

swelled and echoed; and now numbly, it dawned on Dane that something was happening to the Kalquoi. Even blurred as his eyes were, and in spite of the spasms of his body, he could see that, one and all, the aliens had reverted to crystal form. No light gleamed in them. They moved jerkily, as if having trouble even rising from the ground.

The sound in Dane's ears reached a new high note - - a note so clear and pure it ceased to be sound at all, to human ears. In its place came silence - - a taut, thin-strung, nerve-fraying silence that somehow was almost more than flesh and blood could bear.

Now, while Dane watched in the eerie silence, a Kalquoi crystal suddenly cracked wide open in mid-air.

Its shards cracked, too; and its shards' shards. It was dust before it hit the ground.

On all sides, it was the same. Everywhere in the amphitheatre the aliens were shattering to atoms. In seconds, not one of them remained.

Convulsively, Dane twisted; managed to throw one anguished glance upward to the silver needle that was the Sandoz Shaft.

But so fast was the shaft vibrating that it now looked less like a needle than a flash of silver light.

Dane sagged back. Dully, he wondered how long it would take a man to die this way. Certainly there must be a limit to the amount of such maltreatment the human form could stand.

Yet he knew strength was not in him to break loose, tear away.

Was this, then, his destiny? Must he die here, a living conduit for the power now activating the Sandoz Shaft?

What a goal for a compulsion! What an end to a dream! He couldn't even see the spot where Nelva Guthrie lay . . .

Time blurred, after that. There were moments when he was conscious; more when he was not.

When he first heard the drone of the carrier's landing beam, he thought he was delirious.

Then he opened his eyes, and the craft hung there before him, less than fifty feet away. While he watched, it ramped down. The hatch opened.

It was then he *knew* he was delirious, for sure.

Because the first of the two men who climbed out was thick-bodied, bullet-headed, lump-faced, scowling Pfaff, the Security rep with whom he'd clashed.

And the gaunt figure behind Pfaff was that of the hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed, hairless man, master of slaves, whom Dane knew

only as the Being-Without-A-Name!

CHAPTER IX

“WELL, DANE, how does it feel to be the savior of your race?”

Slowly, painfully, Dane forced his eyes to focus and search for the speaker.

It turned out to be the hairless man. He sat on a crumbling stone bench, hunched forward slightly and with his teeth bared in a cold, knife-edged smile. Glowering Pfaff stood to his right, scrubbing a palm over a hairy forearm. To his left, a uniformed, strangely blank-faced stranger stood too stiffly at attention.

Dane moved his head a fraction, seeking Nelva.

She sat off away from the three men, still farther left. Her face wore a stiff, strained look, and she kept her eyes on a spot distant from the group, as if to avoid involvement with them.

Dane shifted his gaze back to the hairless man. He still said nothing.

“I do make a striking picture, don't I, Dane?” the other observed as if answering a question. His smile twisted mirthlessly. “If you'd like to try the effect yourself, a proper dose of some types of radia-

tion poisoning will do it. In my own case, the hair follicles were killed completely - - scalp, eyebrows, facial and body hair, everything. I felt rather bad about it at first, for I was vain enough in my younger days. But then I found that even the loveliest of women is more apt to be impressed by the unique, the different, than run-of-sex handsomeness; and no man ever forgets me. So there are adequate compensations. Personally, I'm quite satisfied."

The voice held the same twist as the smile - - a twist of bitterness, of irony, of lurking menace. It was the voice of a man who enjoyed playing cat-and-mouse . . . or forcing those in his power to confess their thralldom.

The very sound of it made Dane's hackles rise, in spite of all he'd been through. "Who are you?" he asked tightly.

"That's right; you don't know, do you?" The man leaned back a fraction. The lids of the deep-set eyes flickered. "We might make a sort of game of it, even - - let you guess - -"

"He's Thorburg Jessup." This, quite unexpectedly, from Nelva. Hate rasped in her words. Her eyes were smoldering.

"Thorburg Jessup - -!" Involuntarily, Dane's eyes widened. He pulled himself round; sat up.

"Oh! You're feeling better!" Jessup chuckled. "That pleases me. It would have been a pity to lose you, after all the effort I put into your creation."

Dane breathed in sharply. Then, catching himself, he counted off three deeper breaths before speaking: "And . . . what did you have to do with my creation?"

The Security chief lifted a long-fingered hand. "It was my idea. All of it, from the beginning."

"Your . . . idea - -?"

"Precisely. My biochemical staff in the Mercury laboratories is superlative technically, but they need a broader, more incisive mind to shape their concepts. I gave them that - - outlined the exact requirements they'd have to meet in developing the type of creature we'd need to send against the Kalquoi."

"The type of *creature*?"

"Of course. You didn't think you were human, surely?"

Dane's throat drew so tight he couldn't answer. Numbly, he dug his fingers into the dirt of the arena, trying to hide their trembling.

Jessup watched him for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed - - jubilant, sadistic; the self-same laugh Dane had heard that other time, so many worlds away.

Only then, suddenly, Nelva

Guthrie was on her feet - - fists clenched, eyes blazing. "Stop it, you fiend!" she screamed. "Stop it! Stop it!"

Jessup's laugh cut off as if severed by a knife. "Oh, my dear! Have I disturbed you?" Mock solicitude flowed from him like oily vapor. "Really, I *did* have to handle it this way, though. I simply couldn't use a human. There was the matter of subconscious memory, inadvertent knowledge. You have to consider those things when you're dealing with telepaths like the Kalquoi, you know."

Beside the Security chief, pig-eyed, smirking Pfaff moved smoothly into the conversation: "You didn't have much time, either, Mr. Jessup."

"A vital factor," the hairless man nodded. And then, to Dane again: "As you may have guessed, the Kalquoi already had perfected a shield against the brain-drain. It was urgent for us to strike a strong blow at them before they seized the initiative. I decided the Sandoz Shaft, here, offered us our best opportunity. We'd already worked out a new-type catalytic relay that would activate it on practically no power. The only problem lay in coupling the relay to the shaft. To do it by normal procedure, with a task force, would have destroyed its whole value, because it

would have driven the Kalquoi from Callisto."

From Pfaff: "Brilliant analysis, Mr. Jessup!"

"So, I conceived the idea of an artificial man with the relay built in, made part of his tissue structure - - a creature something on the order of my guard, here" - - a gesture to the blank-faced man in uniform - - "but of a higher order. He'd be physically strong, well endowed with initiative. His mind would be good, too, and properly pre-stocked with all necessary information, as well as conditioned to a compulsive drive to reach Callisto and the Sandoz Shaft."

DANE SHUDDERED. Were these the things that dreams were made of - - conditioning, packaged data, concepts born in someone else's brain? Was he really one with the blank-faced guard - - "but of a higher order"?

He wished he'd died at the shaft's base.

Jessup was still talking: ". . . and as a special twist, we named you Clark Dane, after a John Dane who stayed on at Sandoz, long after everyone else had left, trying to learn more about Kalquoi culture. Because he'd established some slight communication with them, I thought his name might help you . . ."

Another piece of the puzzle, clicking into place. Another of Dane's questions answered.

". . . like every life-form, the Kalquoi needs periods of quiescence. The yat-stick provides a closed circuit where a Kalquoi can rest with no escape of energy. So, you were left by a yat-stick experts assured me contained a Kalquoi in repose. I knew your name would arouse the creature's interest. Tie that to your drive to reach Callisto, and the odds were good you'd live to activate the shaft. If you didn't" - - a shrug - - "it didn't matter too much, because you lacked any knowledge detrimental to us."

Of a sudden, Dane was tired of words and explanations. He no longer cared about questions or their answers. Lurching to his feet, he stumbled past the Security chief, out of the arena.

Jessup eyed him curiously. "Where are you going?"

Dane continued his unsteady march. He didn't bother to answer.

Thick-bodied Pfaff moved round to block him. "Hey, you! Mr. Jessup asked you a question!"

Dane veered to pass him.

Belligerent, bullet-head down, Pfaff thrust a foot between Dane's. Dane tripped and fell.

Now Nelva Guthrie was running to him; kneeling beside him. Her

fingers were cool upon his face. "Let him alone, can't you?" she cried fiercely. "Haven't you done enough to him, without more of this torture?"

Jessup's smile faded just a little. "You've been a favorite of mine a long time, Nelva," he said in a too-quiet voice. "Don't jeopardize that status now."

The girl stared up at him, face tear-streaked. "Do you think I care about status at a time like this?"

"A dangerous question, my dear." The Security chief studied her for a long, long moment. "Now I find myself wondering if I can trust you further - - and no matter how I phrase it, the answer comes back, 'No'."

Dane felt Nelva's fingers stiffen on his cheek. A tremor ran through her.

Abruptly, his desire to leave the arena ebbed. He sat up. "What happens when you get no for an answer, Jessup?"

"*Mister* Jessup, you chitza!" Pfaff snarled. But the hairless man himself only smiled faintly.

"A wise man knows when not to talk, Dane," he observed. "For you, this is one of those times. You've done well. I like you. So human or not, I'll look after you so long as you behave."

"And Nelva?"

"She's no concern of yours,

Dane. And as I said once, a wise man knows when not to talk." A pause. "I may not repeat that again."

And from Nelva: "Please, Clark. Let it go."

Dane eyed her soberly. "Why?"

The panic flaring in her eyes was more than enough answer.

To no one in particular Dane said, "Everything that can happen to me has already happened. That gives me leeway to take care of a few things."

He started to rise.

Jessup's twisted smile was gone now. All gone. Sharp and hard, he rapped, "Get him, Pfaff!"

The squat Security rep whipped out a pelgun.

Dane went flat on the ground in the same instant. Clawing out, he caught Pfaff's ankle and jerked the leg from under the thick body.

Pfaff crashed to the ground. Twisting, he fired a pellet.

It went wild. Before the Security rep could trigger off a second shot, Dane swung up a ten-pound chunk of broken masonry in both hands and brained him with it.

Jessup's voice echoed, shouting to the guard. The man-creature raced towards Dane and Nelva.

WRENCHING THE PELGUN from Pfaff's dead hand, Dane shot for his new attacker's knees.

The guard spilled headlong; lay moaning.

Pelgun at the ready, Dane swung to Jessup.

But the Security chief's voice stayed calm, even though his hairless skull was glistening. "You can't shoot, Dane. You can't." And then, forceful and vibrant: "Remember? I'm your master. You're my slave!"

Dane stopped in his tracks.

Deftly, while Dane stood as if paralyzed, Jessup took the pelgun. "You see, I'm still master, Dane. I created you. That's why you're going to stay here. You and Nelva Guthrie. Together. Dead."

Sweat came to Dane's forehead. In an agony of desperate tension, he tried to drag up his hand.

But it was like being thrown back through time into a nightmare. Once again, it was as on that other, dark-remembered day. The control, the conditioning - - they gripped him in spite of all his efforts; bound him tight.

"Can you guess why you two will die, Dane?" Jessup taunted. "Is there any reason you can see?"

Mumbling, Dane said, "Because . . . we know . . . too much?"

"That's right. But what about?"

"About the Kalquoi wanting peace? About the way you sent me to activate the shaft, so they'd think men were all against them?"

"Very good, Dane. Now tell me

why.”

“Because you . . . run things . . . so long as there’s trouble . . . with the Kalquoi. But if peace comes . . . you’ll be just another man.”

“Correct.” Jessup’s hairless face set in a death’s-head grin. “And now, to get on to the business at hand . . .”

He moved towards Nelva. Face chalky with fear, she stumbled backward, behind Dane, out of his view.

Again Dane strained. Again he failed.

Was it true, then? Was he really Jessup’s slave?

Numb, aching, he prayed for some power to break the deep-conditioned trance into which Jessup’s cue-words had thrown him.

Behind him, then, Jessup said something too low to catch. A blow thudded.

Like an echo, Nelva screamed.

Dane never knew what happened in that moment.

Yet within him, it was as if some tight-confining band had snapped. The new stimulus overrode the old. Whirling, leaping over Nelva’s crumpled form, Dane threw himself bodily at Jessup.

The Security chief’s voice, half-choked, gasping the cue-words: “Dane! Remember! I’m your mas- -”

The voice cut off as Dane wrenched the hairless head back and jammed a hand down the yawning throat.

Jessup, arms flailing. Jessup, eyes bulging. Jessup, face purpling.

A final jerk, with every ounce of strength left in Dane’s sagging muscles. The *crack* of bone snapping.

Jessup limp. Jessup dead.

Dane knelt beside Nelva. Hands shaking, he felt for her pulse.

Her eyes opened; grew tender. Slowly, she smiled. Her slim hand clasped his big one.

A shudder ran through him. Face averted, he pulled his hand from hers and drew back.

“Clark - -!” She caught at his elbow. “Dane, it’s all right. I’m not hurt, not badly . . .”

Wordless, again he tried to pull away.

Nelva came close now; clung to him. “Clark, what is it? What’s wrong? What have I done?”

Dane choked. “It’s not you. It’s me; what I am.”

“What you are - -?” She tugged him around and stared at him, grey eyes ever so wide. “What are you, Clark?”

“You heard Jessup say it: I’m . . . not human.” Miserably, Dane forced himself to meet her gaze. “Don’t you understand, Nelva? I don’t even dare to think about - - you and me. I’m - - different.

Like no one, not even Jessup's Zombie guards."

A moment of silence. A long, echoing moment, while the girl sat with eyes downcast.

Then, slowly, she looked up at Dane once more. "I know, Clark. Better than you. Because I've had longer to be lonely."

"To be lonely - -?"

"Yes, Clark." Nelva's grey eyes suddenly were tear-filled, her voice a whisper. "You see, I was the

first - - the very first the lab made with a real mind, and free will. That was why I had to find you, even though I didn't dare tell you anything for fear I'd distort your reaction pattern, put you in danger." A smile, slow and shy, tremulous through the tears. "That's over now, Clark. We . . . don't have to be lonely any more . . ."

The pickup ship came much too soon.

THE END