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g r o u n d

BY HAL CLEMENT

They were inside the sun, in a temperature of 900 Kelvin. With the refrigerators out there was only one wild chance to pull through.

The little ship plunged into the star.

If anyone had asked Jack Elder to justify his uneasiness, he could not have obliged. He might even have gone so far as to deny any such feeling; but he would not have been speaking the truth. He had every confidence in the refrigerators of the *Wraith*, untried as they were; he had helped design them; but the phrase, "Inside a star," which he had used so casually in New York a few short weeks ago, now seemed to carry a more tangible—and deadly—implication.

Admittedly, the words had been a half truth, designed to impress an already awe-struck audience; the fringes of VV Cephei's far-flung atmosphere did technically constitute a portion of the giant sun, and he

was certainly well within those fringes, but the environment was certainly not the raging hell of an atomic furnace which an unwary listener to his words might have been led to suppose. There was actually solid matter outside the spherical hull of the tiny interstellar traveler.

Elder sneaked a glance at the other men in the small cabin. Dressler, who had collaborated with him in the design of the heat-distributor, was looking at the recording dials pertaining to the device with every appearance of satisfaction. Snell, the astrophysicist, was sitting before the control board of his weird mass spectrograph that was mounted outside the hull, and periodically working knobs and switches that changed plates and altered the sensitivity regions of the device. He had some abstruse



theory of isotope distribution in stellar atmospheres, and had come with the *Wraith* on her own test run solely to get his own data.

Calloway, the pilot, had no regular duties while the ship was in free fall. He was engaged in a pastime which increased Elder's uneasiness almost to the breaking point. Hanging before one of the outside view screens—the *Wraith* had no direct vision ports, as the electronic heat distributor required an unbroken conductor for an outer surface—he was gazing with interest at the fuzzy red area that was the image of VV Cephei's core, some three-quarters of a billion miles distant. Elder gave the screen a single glance, and returned to his own work. The dials before him were in the green without exception, and formed a much more comforting view. If Calloway must look at stars, he thought, why not examine the primary of the VV Cephei system, in the opposite direction? True, the blue star was not much farther away than the core of the red giant, but at least the *Wraith* was comfortably outside it.

There was little speech. The ship was in free fall, in an orbit that would carry it through a "grazing" periastron point, about one hundred million miles

inside the arbitrary fringe of the stellar atmosphere. It had a speed far in excess of the star's parabolic velocity at this distance—the orbit was practically a straight line, and they would be within the atmosphere only about three weeks—but it was considered adequate for a first test. The density of the atmosphere at this altitude was known to be negligible, and they expected no serious alteration of their path by friction with the particles of liquid and solid matter, and molecules of gas, which were known to be present.

Snell had assured them of this; there were certainly, he said, no solid or liquid objects to be encountered whose dimensions would much exceed a micron or two, and even those must be appallingly rare to permit such a low general density. Everyone was perfectly at ease, therefore, with the exception of Elder . . .

Until a note like the clang of an immense gong brought the four men abruptly to an erect attitude, to hang poised for seconds in startled silence as the metallic echoes reverberated through the spherical hull and gradually died away.

"Meteor!" gasped Calloway as he leaped for his controls.

"Nonsense!" snapped the astronomer. "There could be no

possible stable orbit in a resisting medium, even one as tenuous as this. Besides we weren't hit hard—the hull seems to be intact."

"The Earth's atmosphere is a resisting medium, and lots of meteors enter it. This one may have come from outside, and have nearly matched our velocity. I'll admit there is no danger, but what else—" He was interrupted.

"Open your lock! Open your lock!" It was a metallic voice that belonged to none of them, and was felt as much as heard. The pilot recognized its source, turned to his lock switches with an expression of relief. "Someone has tied up to us with a magnetic grapple," he said as he opened the outer door, "he's talking to us with a rescue amplifier that uses our own hull as a diaphragm."

Elder and Dressler uttered wordless cries as the meaning of the pilot's words penetrated, and leaped to their control panels. Their refrigerator used an electronic equivalent of the expanding gas cycle heat absorber that had served in household refrigerators for a good many centuries; and in the present state of development of the device an uninterrupted electronic current had to flow in the outer hull. The news that a magnet of consider-

able power was attached to the surface they had nursed so carefully did not make the inventors any happier. Dressler, after a glance at his meters, gave an agonized yell.

"What are the fools trying to do to us? The radiator dropped more than ninety per cent in output when they touched. And how did they get here, anyway? Nothing but our gadget could make a ship habitable for any length of time in this environment, and the only one in existence is right here!"

"It was, I will admit, an uncomfortable journey." The new voice caused them all to whirl toward the door of the passage that led to the air lock. The figure standing just inside the control room was obviously human, but that was all that could be said about him with any certainty. He was clad in a heavy space suit; the helmet was sealed, and the faceplate darkened sufficiently to prevent recognition of the occupant. He drifted further into the room as they stared, and half a dozen other men, similarly dressed, followed him. As the last one entered the room, Dressler found his tongue again.

"Are you aware that your grapple is seriously impairing the functioning of our refrigerator?" he spluttered. "We would

appreciate your casting off at once, before our hull temperature reaches an insupportable value. What do you want here, anyway?" Sudden realization hit him. "This test was supposed to be top secret."

"Some secrets are hard to keep," replied the first of the intruders. "It was hearing about the test that brought us here. We are highly interested in your refrigerator. You will oblige me by showing at once all the apparatus connected with it." His tone was a flat command; there was no suggestion of courtesy or of the slightest interest in Dressler's feelings. The inventor raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"When tests are complete, we plan to return to Earth," he said loftily. "At that time, we will be prepared to listen to offers for the device. Until then, gentlemen, we would prefer to be alone. I will admit that no steps have been taken as yet to secure the necessary patent rights to our machine; I make no further apology for our attitude. I have already pointed out the damage being caused by your grapple, so I am sure you will kindly leave us and break your connection with our hull as soon as possible."

Elder, listening silently, was able to imagine an unpleasant

smile on the stranger's face as he answered this speech.

"I am afraid you fail to understand me. I have no business interest in your invention—at least I have no intention of paying you for it. My purpose will perhaps be made clearer when I say that the last berth of my ship was on Sheliak Three." The ugly smile was more implicit than ever in his voice, as he saw by the reactions of the four listeners that his words had carried meaning. The Federation had made no particular secret of the fact that their patrols had, about a year since, discovered a Suzeraintist base of embarrassing strength on the planet mentioned, and that efforts to reduce it had been seriously hampered by the nearness of the great double primary Sheliak—otherwise known as Beta Lyrae. The Suzeraintists, fanatics, who believed only in violence and their socio-political theories, had been a thorn in the government's side for years.

"The discovery of our base, which you seem to recall, has not been fatal; but it is rather embarrassing. We had planned to move to another planetary system, though it would have been difficult to do so without being tracked, until we heard of the work on this new refrigeration

of yours. There are two planets closer to Sheliak than our own, and Three is already uncomfortably close for existing ships. I think you understand?"

He did, to Calloway, at least. The pilot realized instantly that the planned Suzeraintist retreat closer to the twin suns would be purposeless if the Federation also possessed the information regarding the new protective device; and with that fact grasped, the immediate intentions of the present individual could not be in serious doubt. Calloway had the lightning reactions needed by a space pilot, and his mind was working nearly as fast; in consequence, the pirate had hardly ceased to speak before one of his listeners had burst into frenzied action.

Kicking off from the control board behind, Calloway streaked across the room at the leader of the attackers. The latter swung up his armored arms defensively as the heel of the pilot's big hand came fiercely at his face plate; but the blow was a feint. The other hand streaked to the pirate's belt, and came away with the tiny flame tube that the other had been surprised into forgetting for one precious instant. With a maneuver similar to the pivot parry of the swimming life saver, Calloway continued past his antagonist,

turning as he did so, and discharged the weapon against his armor at a range of a few inches.

Fortunately for both, the weapon was set to low power. In the instant he was able to hold it on the target, the stream of flame heated the armor sufficiently to bring a howl of agony from its occupant—and the reflected heat blistered badly, the hand holding the flame tube. For just that instant he held it; then the pirate's followers were on him, and had wrenchéd the weapon from his grasp. Calloway continued fighting, falling back on his heavy boots as the only lethal devices left to him. About this time the three scientists recovered their wits sufficiently to move; but two of the armored intruders detached themselves from the melee around the pilot and covered them with flame tubes.

Unarmed and unarmored as he was, it took several minutes to subdue the pilot. For some reasons the pirates made no attempt to burn him, and it was not until one of them resorted to his own tactics and sent a metal-shod foot slamming against his skull that the fight ceased. Calloway relaxed in the grip of two of the pirates, blood streaming from temple and cheek where the metal boot had

struck; and the leader of the attackers hung before him, the pain of his burn reflected in the snarl with which he spoke.

"I was going to give you a clean death before we left, it is necessary that you do not pass on any embarrassing knowledge. Now I'm going to leave you alive—and wreck your drive and communicators. The black body temperature here is nine hundred Kelvin, and your hull is polished so your equilibrium temperature is a good deal higher. You can sit here and watch it climb!" He turned away, cringing a little as his scorched body came in contact with the rough lining of his armor, and beckoned to one of the men in charge of the scientists. "Bring one of those fellows along. We'll collect the refrigerator apparatus. Len, you will get any explanations as we take it out. You," he addressed Elder harshly, "will answer his questions. If we have to ask any of the others, you won't hear his answer whether he does or not. Do you follow me?" Elder indicated his complete understanding, and went along at a gesture from the weapon of his guard. The other Suzeraintists followed, except two who remained with the prisoners in the control room.

Elder's will to resist, if it had ever been strong, was now com-

pletely paralyzed. He was not a man of violence or even of action, and would have been the first to admit the fact. He answered the questions of the Suzeraintist technician without hesitation or attempt at deception—it was quickly evident, anyway, that the fellow was probably too good to be easily fooled. He grasped the principles of the refrigerator-very quickly, and informed his chief that it would not be necessary to carry away all the apparatus; only certain key parts, which he indicated. The leader was pleased, and the others still more so, since their labor was lightened thereby. Suddenly, however, the technician turned to Elder.

"How about that junk that was mounted just outside the air lock?" he asked. "I didn't look it over closely, but I figured it was part of the equipment. It was insulated from the hull, I noticed."

"That was not our stuff," replied the inventor. "It's Snell's mass spectrograph. The big disc which is probably bothering you is the cathode—it ionizes the particles outside of the hull, and the ring anode around the admission slit drags them in. He has another electric system to control their speed, and—"

"All right; we don't want it, and you can't hurt us with it.

You can't do much with a cathode gun unless your target's grounded." The technician turned back to the job of dismantling one of Elder's pet machines.

By the time the intruders had finished their work, the atmosphere in the *Wraith* was noticeably warmer—not actually hot, but anyone with a fair imagination could picture what was coming. Inventors have good imaginations as a rule, and even astronomers at times.

Elder had been returned to the group of prisoners in the control room while the last of the equipment was piled together in the air lock. Then two of the Suzeraintists began carrying it to their own ship, which none of the prisoners had yet seen, but which was arousing lively curiosity in the minds of two of them; and the leader returned to the control room. He could not have been seriously burned, for his activity had not been very noticeably impaired, but he was evidently suffering considerably; and Calloway more than expected the Suzeraintists had no one on board with enough medical training to treat a second degree burn. The prospect of nursing a collection of blisters across two or three thousand light years of space was probably bothering the fellow fully

as much as his present discomfort. Something certainly was making him unhappy.

He entered the room, pushed off from the doorway, and brought himself to a halt against the bulkhead a few feet from the pilot, at whom he gazed for several minutes. At last he spoke.

"I'm a little undecided about you," he said. "I can't quite make up my mind whether to leave you here to die, like I said, or take you along and administer the proper punishment myself. It would be fun to watch. On the other hand, you'd be a lot safer here; and if anything were to happen to the equipment we borrowed between here and Sheliak, the council might not like it. So I think I'll leave you here." He struck out suddenly with his metal-gloved fist, catching Calloway on the side of the head. The wound made by the metal boot started bleeding again, and a number of angry red marks showed the plate-pattern of the space suit glove; but the pilot said nothing. The Suzeraintist commander laughed, and suddenly pushed off toward the door. "Come along, men. They're safe enough, and no one will have to worry about them for long. If all the stuff isn't over in our ship by now, we can give the rest a hand." At the

door he paused, looked back at the still motionless figures of his captives, and waved a hand mockingly. "Good-bye, sire. I am sorry I could not do your bidding at once; but the magnetic interference of my grapple on your hull shall be removed as soon as Len tells me all our new equipment is stowed—and that nothing has been forgotten." The last phrase was uttered directly at Elder; evidently the pirate had also thought of the possibility of attempted deception or sabotage. With his final words, the fellow disappeared down the corridor to the air lock, and the prisoners felt free once more to move.

Dressler glided at once to the pilot.

"There isn't much first aid equipment on board," he said, "but there must be something. Come along to the cabins and we'll do what we can to that skull of yours." Calloway started to shake his head, and evidently found the motion too painful; he spoke instead.

"Never mind that; if we're to get out of this we can't waste time, and if we don't there's no point in patching me up. Are you sure all that crowd has left?"

"I think so; we can check easily enough. But what can we do? The refrigerator is gone, which

means we can live only a dozen hours at the outside unless we can get out of here, and that fellow said he was going to wreck our drivers and communicators."

"Let's find out how much damage he did—*quickly*; we certainly can do nothing after they leave, and it shouldn't take them over half an hour to check and stow their loot." As he spoke, Calloway led the way down the corridor leading to the power room.

The exact amount of damage was not at once evident, for the various parts of the refrigerator had been installed in different places and their removal made things look worse than they really were. A close look, however, showed that the Suza-aintist had kept his word. The coils on each of the four second-order drive converters had been fused by a shot from a flame tube, the insulated case of the medium crystal had been broken open, and the crystal itself not only discharged but shattered to pieces.

The main phoenix converter was intact, and there was power enough available to boil a fair-sized lake out of its bed in a matter of seconds; but there was no way of applying the power to drive or communicate.

"I guess he just wanted to tantalize us," said Elder slowly.

"He only wrecked the stuff we could use; and he must have checked pretty thoroughly. Their technician asked about your mass spectrograph outside the lock, Snell, and did nothing about it when I told them what it was. He said a cathode gun couldn't be used against an ungrounded target, and anyway he must have seen that the leads to your cathode couldn't carry a very dangerous load." Calloway listened with growing eagerness to this tale; when Elder had finished, he spoke up.

"We needn't be limited to those conductors. There are yards of coaxial superconductor for converter repairs, and we could run a line to that cathode in a few minutes. We couldn't insulate it very well, but our suits are synthetic and would protect us from anything running through the hull—it would tend to run on the surface anyway. Let's go!"

The three scientists shook their heads negatively in unison, like three members of a team of singing waiters. Snell took it upon himself to explain matters to the pilot.

"I'm afraid, friend Calloway, it's not lack of power that renders a cathode beam ineffective in our situation. A cathode ray is simply a stream of electrons; impinging on a grounded target

they would set up an electric current through it, which could be useful if the target is inhabited by men, whose tolerance to electricity is not exceptionally high. Unfortunately, that electron stream encountering a ship in space simply charges it up until the electrostatic field formed is strong enough to deflect the beam. The stronger the beam, the stronger the field; the weapon provides its own defense."

"But it's something to try; can you think of anything better?" asked the pilot desperately. "Maybe if we send a heavy enough beam across, the current flowing around their hull to equalize its potential would be strong enough to get them. Isn't there a chance?" The heads of Elder and Dressler again oscillated dismally from side to side, and Snell's started to share the motion; but suddenly the astronomer altered the plane of vibration of his skull ninety degrees, and said, "I'll help you if you want to try it. As you say, it's something to do; and also as you say—there might be a chance. Come on; if there is any good to be gotten from this, it will have to be done quickly."

Snell and the pilot made for the spare-part cabinets along the walls of the power room, and began to string the two-inch-

thick strand of Fleming alloy from the leads of the phoenix converter toward the air lock. It would not be necessary to run it through the lock or the hull itself; the mass spectrograph was mounted in a block of insulating synthetic set directly in the hull, and access could be had to the instrument from within the ship. The other two men did nothing; they appeared to have given up all hope, if men can really be said to surrender all traces of that emotion. They were not bereft of reason, however; and Elder moved rapidly enough when Snell addressed him.

"Reg, you might jump up to the control room and tell us how far away that other ship is, and whether he's right in front of the air lock. He should be—he must have tied on there, and I don't suppose he's cast off yet."

Elder went; not only in response to the request, but on his own account. Meaningless as the answer would shortly be, he wondered how the Suzeraintist vessel had protected itself this far inside VV Cephei's atmosphere without the refrigerator they had come to steal. The screens were still working, and he was able to examine the ship closely.

The protection was evident.

The ship was a sphere like their own, and only a little larger. One side was brightly polished, silvery metal, and that hemisphere was turned to face the crimson heart of the giant sun; the other was black, to radiate off as much heat as possible. It was a standard system on space craft which were called upon to approach stars at all closely, and its effectiveness did not approach that of the Elder-Dressler device. That ship must be quite uncomfortable by this time; that might have been why the Suzeraintists were wearing space suits. An evacuated hull would have been additional protection—for a time.

Elder remembered the errand on which he had been sent, noted that the other ship was still directly opposite their air lock, about two hundred yards away, and that the line of the magnetic grapple still extended across the intervening space. He returned to the power room with the information, and met Snell and Calloway in the corridor, removing the wall panel that exposed the back of the mass spectrograph. It took them only a few moments to complete this task, and the pilot at once set to work joining the cable to the silver disc that marked the rear of the heavy cathode. This did not take long either, as he had a

molar diffusion welder with a head set for the Fleming alloy.

While this work was going on, Elder was sent back to the control room to keep an eye on the pirate vessel. Dressler was still in the power room; he had been put to work checking the phoenix converter for damage that the first inspection might have failed to disclose.

The entire job took little time; heavy as it would have been on a major planet, the Fleming cable was easy enough to manipulate in free fall, and there certainly was no great complexity to the circuit being set up. Twenty minutes from the time the outer air lock door had closed behind the pirates, everything was ready. By this time even the two inventors had caught the fire of enthusiasm and were watching eagerly for the circuit to be closed—if it could be. It was Calloway who had to restrain the general enthusiasm—probably because he had never considered the attempt anything but a forlorn hope. He warned them of the small chance of success as they all glided from the corridor where the welding had just been finished to the control room, where he at once sought the pilot board from which he could handle all the power developed in the room below. Elder re-

turned to the screen—his watch had been interrupted as he heard them approach—and at once gave an exclamation of alarm.

"They've cast off!" he called. "The grapple is being drawn back, and their air lock is closed." Calloway promptly craned his neck to view the plate for himself, and Snell moved over beside Elder. The astronomer nodded at what he saw.

"The grapple is about half way between the ships now, Calloway," he said quietly. "I'd advise letting go as soon as you can; I doubt if they'll hang around long after the cable is reeled in." Calloway's reply was equally quiet.

"The switch is closed."

Four pairs of ears strained for a nonexistent sound, and four pairs of eyes sought the screen, which still showed the enemy sphere hanging unharmed beside them. Neither eyes nor ears caught any sign of the terrific load that was being slammed into space from the silver disc beside their air lock.

"We're in an atmosphere," said Calloway suddenly. "Wouldn't that ground our charge?"

"You could stuff radio tubes with this atmosphere and find them working nicely," said the astronomer briefly. "The only difference between this atmosphere and empty space is the

factor I used to tell you when we were in it—*Holy Smoke, why didn't I think of that!*"

His companions had no time to ask for an elucidation of this remark. On the heels of the astrophysicist's words, the eyes fixed on the viewplate were abruptly dazzled by a flare of yellow-green light that suddenly erupted in front of the image of the other ship. Calloway, whose eyes were by far the fastest, was sure it had jetted originally from the end of the grapple cable, of which a few yards had been still projecting; but now there was no way to be sure. The flare was not just a spark; it continued, the automatic safety controls on the screen cutting down the brilliancy of the image so that nothing else could be seen. Calloway made a movement to open the switch, and was stopped at once by Snell.

"Leave it on!" exclaimed the astronomer. "Leave it on until we touch! We have no drive, remember!" The pilot obeyed, only half understanding what went on. He let the power run for nearly five minutes, and finally cut it off when Snell signaled him to do so. The plate instantly cleared.

The other sphere was a scant fifty yards away, and visibly drawing closer. An area eight or

ten yards across, centered at the spot where the magnetic grapple had been projected, was glowing a fierce white; and a wave of heat from the corridor where the cathode was mounted caused the men to realize that their own hull could be in little better condition. Investigation showed, however, that only the anode of the mass spectrograph had suffered seriously—the insulating block in which the device was mounted had held up very well. Snell's instrument, however, was a hopeless ruin.

There was no sign of activity on the other ship. Calloway and Snell donned space suits and went across, gaining access through the lock on the further side. They found three charred bodies in the air lock toward the *Wraith*, four rigid forms in the control room, and a single living pirate in one of the bunks who was just recovering the use of his limbs after a heavy electric shock. He was quickly disarmed and locked in his cabin; and Calloway immediately attached grapples to the *Wraith* and began accelerating as hard as he dared away from the core of VV Cephei.

Three hours later, when they had attained open space and made a short second-order leap to safety, the others joined them in the Suzeraintist ship. Elder

and Dressler had a question to ask.

"Snell, just what closed that circuit? Cal's idea of knocking them out before the hull loaded up was nonsense from the first; and you said that there was practically no matter outside our hull to conduct electricity. Anyway, gases and dust particles are rotten conductors. You seemed to expect something just before things let go; what was it?" The astronomer smiled.

"I should have thought of it sooner. Of course, a complete circuit was what we needed. That length of cable projecting toward our hull helped a lot—don't jump on me, I know it wasn't enough by itself, but it helped, as I say. The real deciding factor was *that*." He pointed through a port in the control room wall. The others stared, and said nothing. Beyond the transparent window was the dazzling blue-white glare of a sun, a sun near enough to show a perceptible disc. It hung close beside the foggy red bubble that was the red giant they had just left. Snell saw the uncomprehending expressions on the three faces, and smiled again.

"Gentlemen, meet VV Cephei—the *primary* of the system we have just left. It is the one you see from Earth with a telescope. It's fainter and less massive, but

far more voluminous, companion occupies a large fraction of the space between, so that one surface is comparatively close to the primary—a primary far brighter than Sol, and a class B sun, which means lots and lots of ultra-violet radiation"—he smiled faintly once more as Elder's whistle of comprehension reached his ears—"which in turn means a heavily ionized layer in the region of the companion's atmosphere nearest the primary. There are other such systems—Epsilon and Zeta Aurigae, to name two. I will admit that the actual ion density is very small, but coupled with the local field intensity caused by the projecting cable it was enough to start things, and the vapor produced when the cable boiled away undoubtedly helped. Is it clear enough?"

"No," said Calloway. "That current was running through both ships. Why didn't it get us? We weren't protected any more than they."

"Not through both ships. Through their ship, and through our Fleming cable, which is a superconductor. Their entire hull had a far higher resistance than our cable, so in their ship the current went through men where it could—the fellow in the bed, luckily for him, was probably touching metal at only one

spot. The others were up and around, and even if they didn't close a circuit with their bodies in the first instant, I am sure none of them would have had self-control enough to stand still when he found himself alive.

"And that, I think, is that. I want to go back to Earth and get a new spectrograph. I'll have to do all my work over again, blast it; I forgot to remove my plates from the machine before we closed the circuit."