

PLANET STORIES



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IT

By
HAYDEN HOWARD

BEFORE the Captain's feet fled ghosts of dust. Crackling with static electricity they fled before his body-charge. Ringing out through pools of heat mirage they mushroomed up the toppled walls. In his ears their crackling was laughter. In his brain he screamed at them.

Crazy dust ghosts, you are more self-willed than I.

His runaway feet splatted on and on over Hogan's deep-toed, running bootprints in a race of death he could not stop. Crazy dust ghosts. They at least could settle and die. He had the thing on his back. He had it driving him endlessly on, his body burning with exertion, his uncontrollable hands clutching the auto-electric rifle. He had already killed one of his men.

Fool, Joe Hogan, at least stop and try to kill me. This way you are only leading me to the spheroid. Then it will be able to kill you all.

Stop, stumble, anything damn you; now he was thinking at his feet. But they never faltered.

Suddenly the thing shifted its soft weight and drove his feet hard, hurling him face down behind a fallen girder an instant before Hogan's manmade lightning clanged along the girder and flushed sparrows of dust into the sky. Behind the dust the Captain's body leaped to a new location and bobbing from its cover fired, not blindly as if dust-veiled eyes had aimed but deliberately, with the slow-squeezing aim of its organic radar. But its batsense was too late, for it quivered angrily on his neck.

As his body burst through the dust, the Captain's good eye caught the faroff glint of sun on moving steel where Hogan fled into a jungle of girders. The Captain's long legs drove hard in pursuit, but after a few hundred yards they began to stagger.

Slowly, inexorably, the struggling Earthman was metamorphosed into a Siamese twin—a twin whose partner was jellied death.

Bloodsucker, his thoughts rang, you are as stupid as a man. Keep driving me this fast and you'll have a dead horse. And what will you be without me? Black gunk frying in the sun!

Perhaps I'll die soon, he hoped as his quivering legs rebelled and the city misted before his good eye.

Angrily it jabbed his thumb into his blinded eye. But it could not spur fresh activity from his legs. No pain could do that now.

It let him walk awhile. Soon he crossed the blurry tracks his men had left when he led them into the dead city, unsuspecting.

SINGLE file they had threaded among the collapsed dome-structures and overthrown cylindricals, a segmented worm of men probing within a vast and withered corpse. First the Captain, then Grimes, then Ives, Kwatahiri, Spencer with his hog-snouted prisma-reflex camera, finally Hogan, the worm's rear end. Six of them. The Captain had left Templar to "guard" the spheroid.

In the last city, where as in the preceding five they had found no sign of life except a scum of dried protoplasm thirty feet up on the sides of the buildings, Templar had begun to see "them". The Captain winced every time he saw Templar's dark blue eyes superimposed on the wreckage ahead, eyes widening with unspeakable horror at something no one else could see. Templar had been too good a soldier to scream, but the Captain was an old hand at spotting "symptoms", so Templar sat this one out. And the Captain had made the long-awaited decision: after this city they were going home.

Orders are orders, but a good captain will not interpret them so narrowly as to



expend his men for no purpose. There is room for judgment. He had been sent to ascertain if there were life on this seared planet. After reasonable search he had found none. They were going home.

Overhead the sky was empty, roofless, blinding white. It sucked the sweat before it could form and made their eyeballs stick. It shimmered on the prostrate girders and made them scorching hot. That the girders were silicon instead of steel did not excite them anymore. Nor did they exclaim over the generators of malleable glass with inner windings clearly visible like demonstration models or the strange doorways, all of them exactly three feet in diameter, all of them exactly thirty feet above the cracked mud streets as though the intervening space had been filled with water. It was too damn hot.

As they wormed toward the core of the city, Hogan, who followed Spencer, began to hum softly about a red-haired baby with two great big humps. He kicked up the dust and chattered to himself. He blinked at the white sky and tripped. Touching a girder involuntarily, he staggered back cursing, leaving the skin of his hand and wrist smoking on the silicon.

"Damn that Templar," he shrilled, "drinking beer in the cool of the spheroid!"

"In the cool of the spheroid," cried the echoes.

"The spheroid," replied echoes of the echoes.

Hogan dropped his rifle with a clatter and sucked his wrist.

"Shake it up," shouted the Captain from the head of the worm.

"Hogan's hurt," Spencer called from the tail. But Hogan lurched forward hissing: "Tend your own jet hole."

The Captain was back there, tall and concerned, grabbing Hogan's arm, making him show the burn. Deftly he bandaged it. "You can go back to the ship if you want to."

"Hell no and let you guys find something worth something," Hogan retorted and spat near Spencer's foot.

The Captain watched the gob of saliva sizzle and vanish. He looked across into Hogan's red-veined eyes, then down into Spencer's wide gray ones. Spencer's cheeks were puffed, flaming red. His lips were

puffed, cracked and quivering slightly as though he was getting ready to laugh or cry. He shivered when the Captain squeezed his shoulder.

Too young, the Captain thought. I shouldn't have brought him out here. But he didn't say anything, just squeezed Spencer's shoulder again and trotted back to the head of the worm.

The monster had a million legs and it was shiny blue. A smooth hemisphere, it squatted on the hub cap of the city, holding the dead lifelines, the puppet strings of the city, python-thick electrical conduits that radiated out in all directions to tie the city together, to integrate the myriad mechanisms of the ultra-technical city, to bleed the streams of electrons that were the life blood to the city. There was life in the old boy yet.

When the Captain stepped too near a conduit, lightning knocked him down. When Spencer started to help the Captain up, a four-inch spark bit his finger. Hogan hee-hawed. But when the Captain jumped up and, grinning, poked his finger an inch from Hogan's dished-in nose Hogan yelped with pain.

"Yes, Hogan," the Captain laughed, "if you had gone back you'd of missed this. Here is the brain of the city, perhaps of the planet. If there is life on this planet we should find it here."

"Check this!" Spencer shouted. He had backed away to include the entire monster in camera focus. Now he was running toward them waving a print.

While the Captain examined it, Spencer turned the pointer-knob on the back of the camera, watched the needle creep across the dial, then opened the back and removed a second print. But the Captain was still staring at the first one. He turned it upside down, held it to the light, looked at the back. Hogan elbowed between the two men and poked a black-rimmed fingernail at the top of the print.

"When did you climb on top, Spencer? I never saw you."

"I didn't."

Hogan hee-hawed. "Then how'd this picture show you standing up there? You were up there and the Captain took the picture. Come on, quit kidding, my eyes don't fool."

Very carefully, trying to keep his hands steady, the Captain lit a cigarette and inhaled. He watched the smoke rise. "It could be a trick reflection."

"Or a mirage," Spencer filled in. "It's hot enough for a mirage." Then he handed over the second print. "But in this one I'm opening a trapdoor."

"Ho!" Hogan shouted. "This one wasn't taken from the ground. Look at the angle. This was taken from a copter."

THE Captain exhaled very slowly. Due to the curve of the hemisphere, this trapdoor could not be seen from their location on the ground. But from thirty feet up, the level of the scum line, it would have been visible, if the trapdoor was really there. He was afraid it was. Somewhere. Was it on Pluto? He had heard tales of people, or were they machines? who had been able to rearrange molecular patterns, when initial cohesion was not great, by remote control. But there was no life here. The flare-up of this planet's sun had surely extinguished all life, even far below the surface.

Without a warning Hogan clipped Spencer on the mouth. Even sane he was dangerous when he thought he was being made to play the fool. Now he was a harshly breathing windmill of fists and boot-toes until the Captain stunned him with a judo blow to the back of the neck.

"You alright, Spencer? Just hold your head between your legs, you'll be all right." The Captain turned. "Grimes, would you bring me your climbing rope. No, don't tie him up. I'm going to use it to get on top of that dome." He bent on the grappling hook. On the third attempt he snagged something up there he couldn't see. "Don't look at him Spencer. Go take three more pictures; that's an order."

By the time he had dragged himself to the top, Spencer was back.

"First picture I'm climbing inside," he shouted. "Second picture you're climbing inside. Third picture Grimes is climbing inside."

"So your camera thinks it photographs the future does it?" the Captain shouted. "Ives and Kwatahiri come on up. No, Kwatahiri stay there; Spencer better stick with me today. Bring the gun, Ives."

After Spencer skinned up the rope, Ives stood holding onto it, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I guess the Captain forgot how I burned my hands yesterday."

"That's O. K.," Grimes said. "He don't care who goes. You stay here and I'll go. Bye, bye Hogan."

Hogan swore and rubbed his neck. "All of 'em, crazier'n Templar," he muttered, and he crawled over in the shade and swigged Spencer's canteen. No one was going to rabbit punch him and get away with it.

When Grimes caught up with the other two, they were already deep inside the control chambers. The translucent walls bathed the rows of blank-faced dials and drooping levers in a blue light. Further down, where they passed below ground level, they had to switch on their flashlights. The narrow ramp corkscrewed tighter and tighter as it plunged into the depths until the Captain began to feel mild twinges of claustrophobia. But it was cooler down there, and his legs kept hurrying him downward.

"Hurry up Cap," Spencer panted behind him.

Why hurry? thought the Captain, but he began to run. Why hurry? With what amounted to a great effort of will he stopped. Spencer rammed into him, knocked him sprawling, scrambled right over him without a word of apology. Grimes stepped on the Captain's back as he tried to force his way past, but the Captain grabbed his ankle.

"Leggo sir, I gotta be first," Grimes gasped.

"First where?"

"I dunno." But he tried to twist away without hurting the Captain. "If you let me go I'll find out for you," he added craftily. By this time even the glow of Spencer's light had disappeared.

The Captain shouted for Spencer to come back but there was no answer.

"I'll find Spencer," Grimes pleaded. "Please, sir." With that he kicked the Captain's wrist and escaped. Sitting up, the Captain watched Grimes' light vanish into the depths. After a moment of hesitation he followed. He wanted to go back, to get another gun, to stop and think this thing

out, but he kept on walking, part of his brain reassuring him that he was doing the right thing, searching for his men, doing his duty. But he knew that wasn't right. He was being pushed.

When the ramp levelled off he managed to stop again, sitting down determinedly on the stones. He slapped his face and shook his head, but when he arose he shuffled forward again until his light cast a dark shadow on the floor. Happy for an excuse to stop, he dropped on his knees beside it. A toy? A tiny monstrosity with a sausage-shaped thorax, six webbed feet beneath, nearly a dozen hands or feelers on top, some of them specialized pincers or hooks, others as generalized as the hands of a man, all of them semi-retractable. It had a rubbery feel. What bothered him was the head. There really wasn't any, only a mount for two froglike eyes, no space for a brain. Where the neck should have been clung a small blob of waste. But he had difficulty in pulling it off, and when he did he saw it was part of the design, an auxiliary creature bloated like a woodtick, a bladder and a fang-ringed mouth, nothing more than a toy parasite.

Repressing a shudder he fitted the toy back together and dropped it in his pocket. Then his feet hurried him down the ramp. It was plunging again, steeper and steeper until he tripped and rolled, cradling his flashlight, and banged against something hard and vibrant. All around him in the darkness, water-choked voices sang: "Go on, go on, go on," until he flashed his light about and his eyes assured his ears that the voices were only the sounds arising from tall glass cylinders of rhythmically perking mercury.

Abruptly he realized that the mercury columns operated the tall black machine in the center and that this was a hydraulic press which in turn fed the humming electric motor beside it. Piezoelectricity on a practical scale, electricity produced from the compression-expansion of rock crystals in the press, power for the press produced from the expansion of mercury vapor, the heat for expansion drawn from the core of the planet, the whole set-up was as immortal as machinery could be. It might have been running for thousands of years.

But everything was swept from his mind by the overpowering vision of a round red door with a handle shaped like the letter S, and his body hurried across the room, down another passageway, around a curve and there was the door, with Grimes and Spencer struggling to turn the handle.

They didn't bother to look up until he shoved them aside. Seizing Grimes' rifle, he jammed the barrel into the S and levered the handle, oblivious of the fact that he was smashing the front sight. Slowly the door opened from its center, widening like Spencer's camera's eye.

"Stay back, that's an order," he heard his voice say. Then his body lunged through the aperture into freezing darkness. The cold room arched away in all directions, drawing his flashlight through metal grillwork into nothingness. The light caught something black and swollen up there, almost directly above his head. But the foul odor at his feet drew the light down onto black, ruptured sacks that had fallen from their perches in the grill and spoiled and smeared the floor with corruption. Unwillingly he knelt to touch one of them. Cold, and the floor was icy cold, throbbing gently beneath his feet, refrigerated.

Overhead something hissed, and his mind tried to break for the door. He saw himself doing it, rushing past the two faces in the doorway, fleeing up the ramp to the surface. But he was still there, almost devoutly kneeling when the thing rustled silkily and plopped upon his neck.

HE GASPED instinctively throwing up his arm to knock it off. But it froze his arm midway, and he knelt there, a statue, trying to make his arm obey. A sharp pain told him it was boring into his neck. Then he fell on his side, his legs kicking like a dying rabbit's. In a moment he couldn't even do that. By the time Spencer reached him he was completely paralyzed and voiceless. But his mind was clear again, clearer than it had been since he approached the great control dome on the surface, almost as though the thing had to devote its entire tele-force to the control of his body. There was none left for Spencer and Grimes. As they raised his head and chafed his hands and made ineffectual suggestions

they seemed perfectly normal again. He realized that in the semi-darkness they had not noticed it on his back.

To his horror he felt the big muscles of his body moving one by one, experimentally. His hands clasped and unclasped of their own accord. His vocal cords emitted a frightened croak as his left hand closed about the barrel of the flashlight. Without other warning he clubbed Grimes' forehead and felt bone crush beneath the blow. Mouth sagging open with the amazement of death, Grimes sank to the floor. The Captain's body lunged clumsily over him, flailing the flashlight at Spencer's head.

"Captain, you hit Grimes," the young man shrielled the self-evident as he backpedalled, forearms shielding his head from the Captain's awkward left-handed blows. Whirling he fled through the doorway and along the corridor. But he was a short-legged young man, running too long in the same spot, and the Captain loped behind him; heavy flashlight raised to strike.

With a terrific effort the Captain struggled to recapture his own body. Concentrating a rush of thought on his right knee he made it buckle, pitching him on his face upon the stones. It had not yet learned to put out his hands to break his fall. When it managed to raise his head, Spencer's footsteps had faded away and it was quivering angrily.

Then came further horror. His own fingers punished him. Experimentally they probed his left eye. When the thing felt his tremors of agony it screwed his thumbnail into the eyeball. When he regained consciousness the pain was on the other side of a wall of numbness. His body sat up, and he realized that it had been unable to move him while he was unconscious.

Perhaps I can catch it by surprise? Cautiously he raised his right hand toward the back of his neck, thinking a jumble of thoughts that he hoped would conceal his purpose. He almost reached it. Quivering angrily it forced his hand down again to discipline his eye. Through the curtain of pain he thought back: if it had access to the thinking part of my brain, my first thought about catching it would have given me away. As it was, I very nearly succeeded. It is torturing me now because it

is frightened. Next time it is off guard, I will strike quickly.

AS IT stood him up, he tried again. Its punishment made him faint. But that was a moral victory for him. If it became over-emotional and killed him, that would be a moral victory too. With the death of Grimes, he had lost interest in survival, but the thing had not. He suspected it knew it was the last of its species. Probably its drive for survival and reproduction was tremendous. If he were to die, the thing, like the tiny model parasite in his pocket, would be without means of locomotion. A helpless sack and a mouth, that's all it would be if he were dead.

It walked his body unerringly through pitch darkness to the refrigerator room, picked up the rifle by the barrel, ran his fingers over the smashed front sight, down the barrel, over the electro-coil and onto the action. When it started pulling the switches while the muzzle still leaned against his chest, he became hopeful that the end was in sight. But the safety-catch proved to be on. Finally it released that. Resting the barrel on his shoulder, it went after the switches again, while he tried surreptitiously to aim the muzzle where it should be.

Lightning scorched the back of his neck and the gun clattered to the floor. But he felt it shaking violently on his back. When he made a grab for it, he almost caught it off guard. Then it didn't even punish him, just clung there shaking. Inside his brain, the Captain smiled. Apparently it was unfamiliar with such weapons. He was surprised it's first move had not been to retrieve some powerful weapon of its own. Perhaps the planet had been so well organized or even civilized that there had been no stimulus to invent or use weapons of this sort?

Cautiously it raised the rifle, this time pointing the muzzle the other way. Lightning flared. It dropped the rifle. Quickly it picked it up and fired again and again like a child with a new toy. When it raised his hand, instead of gouging his eye, it gently stroked his cheek. He shuddered.

Bending him over, the thing ran his hands over Grimes. It felt Grimes'

wrist, then felt his, then felt Grimes' again. Suddenly it released him and he sank limp and exhausted across Grimes' body. Perhaps it wanted to see if he could help Grimes, bring him back to life, otherwise, why this solicitude? He considered making another grab for it, but he knew it would be on guard. He would be smarter to cooperate. He went through the motions of artificial respiration, then shrugged. What would it make of this gesture? He began to talk to the thing, then to tap out morse code on the floor, finally to trace out triangles, squares, pentagons with his fingers: no response. Without warning he grabbed with both hands.

It did not even bother to punish him. It set his hands to gathering the small cold bodies of its species. When he was through they made only a double handful that he carried up a twisted ramp, through doors that creaked automatically in the darkness, to a warm, faintly sweet smelling room. Here he laid the bodies on a corrugated ledge.

In darkness he knelt and beat his knuckles on the floor. Rising, his fingers pressed a button. Something clicked and it began to swing its weight rhythmically as if it danced to a sound he could not hear. Or could it be rhythm received through some other sense perception unknown to man? After a while he pressed several buttons in rapid succession. A blinding electric arc leaped from the ceiling, turning the heap of bodies into a crackling funeral pyre.

The smoky light revealed row on row of strangely carved figures, model dome-structures and cylindricals, shapes strung from wires resembling fish, toys like the one in his pocket, and many-creased forms resembling walnut meats or possibly brains. As the light died away, it jabbed the Captain's eye as if to make him feel pain in honor of its dead companions. It jabbed with increasing savagery until he fainted and ended the ceremony.

When he regained consciousness it set his hands to scraping the ashes into a smooth bowl. His hands placed this on a shelf and his feet carried him back down the twisting ramp. As he reached the bottom he heard the excited voices of Spencer

and Kwatahiri, then Ives' deeper voice as his feet hesitated in the corridor. It clutched his rifle hard. Turning into a side room it snatched up something that felt like wire netting. Then it made his feet walk softly down the main corridor toward the voices, and he mentally cursed his men for their ill caution. All three fools had crowded into the refrigerator room. But to his relief his body hurried up the ramp, through the power room, then up the second ramp to the control room and the surface.

As the glare of the sun struck the thing, it made a long shudder pass through the Captain's body. Then it prodded his blind eye as though it somehow blamed him for the desolation out there. But it prodded him with finesse as it drew him back out of the sun, for his efficiency was essential, no matter what its next move.

From below drifted Hogan's hoarse voice crooning of a red-haired baby with two great big hums. The thing unbuttoned the Captain's shirt and drew it over his head like a cowl. Then it slung the rifle and opened out the wire net. After innumerable vacillations and quiverings it sent him sliding down the rope, unconscious that the rope was burning through the skin of his hands.

"There you are," Hogan shouted. "I knew Spencer'd pulled a Templar. What'd you find?" He wasn't going to make anything of the rabbit punch.

The Captain's legs gave way as they struck the ground and he sprawled awkwardly.

"Geeze Cap, you really burnt your hands. What's the matter, are you sick? What happened to your eye?" As he extended his hand, the Captain's body leaped away. As it lunged forward again, net swung high, his shirt slipped back, making Hogan's expression change from surprise to bug-eyed horror. Netting a strong man did not prove as practical as the thing may have imagined. Mouthing obscenities, Hogan shook loose, scooped up his rifle and fled. As he reached the cover of a cylindrical, he whirled, fired, missing an easy, motionless target in his haste, and fled again. The thing unslung the rifle and started in pursuit.

Hogan's tracks were easy to follow in the dust, but where whirling wind from

the cross streets had swept them away, the thing followed as confidently as ever. It was not hunting by sight. After they exchanged shots and crossed over the trail the party had made on entering the city, it became obvious that Hogan was leading it straight to the spheroid. The Captain's brain cursed him silently. The fool!

As he topped the last rise, the thing stopped him abruptly. There, gleaming in the sunshine was the spheroid. Before the entry hatch two tiny figures gesticulated. Hogan was telling Templar all about it. Shivering, the thing pulled the shirt up over his head again. Then it dallied, still shivering, obviously searching for a plan of action.

Didn't expect anything like that did you? the Captain thought. He tried to speak and did manage to drool a little. Then it started him down the hill, freezing his left hand at waist level long before he could grab. Real terror struck the Captain now. The thing was going to try some sort of bluff. It was going to try to take the ship.

"Here he comes," shouted Templar.

It waved the Captain's left arm and broke into a run. Templar ran to meet it. But Hogan ran after Templar and grabbed his shoulder. Templar shook him off.

"Stop," Hogan screamed. "I tell you, he's a murdering maniac."

But Templar ran to the Captain.

"Put your arm over my neck, sir. Gee you've hurt your eye terribly."

But the Captain gave no sign of understanding. He pulled back suspiciously when Templar reached for his arm.

"Sir, are you all right? I think Hogan is almost crazy enough to shoot us. He's gone absolutely mad."

Covering them with his rifle, Hogan came closer, his dust-streaked face aquiver with indecision. "He's nuts Temp. Look at his face. Why doesn't he speak?"

Shoot me you fool, the Captain's brain screamed. Beneath its hood the thing quivered violently, but it held the Captain's body under perfect control.

HOGAN jammed his rifle muzzle against the Captain's head. "Speak, damn you, speak. What's on your back? You see Temp, he's so crazy he can't even speak—"

Violently the Captain's body grappled for possession of the rifle. With a blinding flash it went off between them. Over and over in the dust they rolled, while Templar danced about and did nothing. As the Captain's hands clamped on Hogan's windpipe he saw Templar had finally picked up the rifle. Surely he must see the thing on his back. Shoot me, you fool.

Gasping, Hogan tore loose and swung his fist against the Captain's teeth. Lunging, he drove his knee into the Captain's stomach.

In that moment Templar made his decision. He slammed down the rifle barrel on Hogan's skull.

Gently, the Captain's hands took the rifle away from Templar. They pointed the muzzle at his belly and signalled for him to lie down. When Templar stared uncomprehending, they fired a blast near his cheek. By the time the Captain's hands had finished trussing Templar with his own trousers and belt, the blue-eyed young man had noticed the thing on his Captain's neck—and quietly gone mad.

After binding Hogan's unconscious bulk, it dragged both of them into the spheroid. There it frantically opened drawers, thumbed through illustrations in books and manuals, pulled levers and pressed buttons indiscriminately, as though it was looking for a clue to guide its further actions. It had dropped its net by the control dome. Now it seemed to be searching for some more effective means of taking men alive. The auto-electric gun manual held its attention, especially the circuit diagrams that showed how the deadly stream of electrons might be widened into a stunning spray. Unfortunately there was even a line drawing of a man stunning and tying a venumod. It stared for a long time at the accompanying frequency tables. The setting-numbers on the receiver of the gun, the corresponding numbers on the table, the logic of mathematics made the thing's inability to read words quite immaterial.

When Spencer clambered through the hatch, the diffusion ray stunned him in his tracks. Quickly it leaped out and stunned Ives and Kwatahiri. After the Captain's hands had bound them with climbing ropes, they lay on the floor of the spheroid, their

limp bodies gradually stiffening with horror as the effects of the ray wore off. As their voices began to curse and argue and plead, night descended. But it did not need to turn on the lights.

By morning the men were moaning for water, and the thing seemed to notice the Captain's increasing weakness. It freed him to see what he would do to help himself.

The Captain lunged for the water faucet, but, as the cool water trickled before his eyes and the men on the floor cried out for it, the Captain was thinking. Taking down the small bottle of poison intended for zoological specimens, he poured a few drops into a glass; not much, his stomach would throw back a large dose before it had time to take effect. He had seen that Ives had already rubbed his wrist bonds thin. In a few hours Ives would be free to help the others.

As the Captain raised the glass, the thing quivered and forced his arms down. It made him kneel beside Hogan, hold the glass to Hogan's lips. The still-dazed man drank greedily.

While Hogan was dying, a slow process, it savagely punished the Captain's eye. But he welcomed the pain. Even the thing was unable to control the heaving of his chest or the tears coursing from his good eye.

Spencer raised his head: "Captain, if you can hear me, I want you to know that we understand what has happened. We are still with you, if you are there. If you have to kill us to beat this thing, that's all right."

After that, it gave the Captain no more freedom. With much hesitation and quivering it filled a clean glass and gave his four surviving men water. Then it carefully examined the food in the refrigerator. But Ives was the only one who would eat. After a safety-waiting period, it stuffed the Captain's mouth with only those kinds of food that Ives had eaten.

When the sun began to slant into the open hatchway, the Captain felt the thing's body take on a new motion, a slow, regular rolling motion that increased in speed as it sat his body beside Ives and bent his back until the thing touched Ives' neck. When Ives ceased screaming, the Captain's body rose and turned. On Ives' neck clung a tiny replica of the thing.

By late afternoon it had also made Templar and Kwatabiri hosts. Only Spencer seemed conscious, his wide gray eyes watching the Captain's every move. When it tried again to feed him, he clenched his teeth and turned his head away. But the others chewed and swallowed mechanically.

When it went back to the refrigerator, the Captain managed to deflect his left hand so that it drew out a can of beer instead of a grapefruit. A vague hope arose in the Captain's brain as his hands clumsily punched a hole in the can. The thing filled a glass and knelt before Spencer.

Drink it, drink it, drink it, the Captain's brain shouted.

Spencer stared at the Captain's face for a long time as though he was trying to read something there. Then he opened his lips and gulped the beer.

When the thing sat the Captain down at the table, he noticed the grenade lying between the screw driver and the artichoke. So near but yet so far, if he could only pull the pin. But his hands moved past the grenade to the screw driver. The screw driver was the thing's beer can punch. Using the wrench for a hammer, it raised a geyser of beer. Of its own free will it raised the can to the Captain's lips.

The beer was bitter, stinging pleasure, cold in the throat, warm in the belly. He put it away fast and reached for another can. After a slight hesitation it freed his hands to punch the holes, one to take the gush of beer, one to keep it flowing. It fizzed in his mouth and bubbled out of the corners and over his chin. A cold stream crept down his neck to his collar bone. The third can he drank more daintily. With the fourth he felt the thing relax. It's weight sagged a bit as though it was feeling the effects of the alcohol in his bloodstream, and it let his hands relax upon the table.

Gently he glided his left hand toward the grenade, but the hand froze, then curled back for another can of beer. His right hand was a trifle unsteady as it raised the can to his lips. On the next can he forgot to punch the second hole and gulped the golden pleasure in erratic jets until he was sucking an empty can. Both he and it were game for another. He could feel the beer

bubbling and trying to come back up. He could feel the tautness of his grinning lips, the limpness of the weight upon his neck. Gradually he edged his left hand toward the grenade, but the thing curled it back for another can.

Opening this can was troublesome and he forgot about the grenade. His wife smiled at him across the table. Soon they were floating down through blue warmth toward Earth so green and soft beneath.

"S' bedtime," he mumbled. The sound of his own voice sat him up straight. He remembered where he was and his smile went away. Then he felt it coming back again with his teeth hard beneath it. Very cautiously he slid his right hand up his cheek and back over the short hair on his neck until his fingers touched the thing's shrinking tissue. It slid his hand away and quivered in gentle admonition.

"Please," his voice whispered, "it will feel so good." And his hand tried again, like a gentle lover.

Across the room Spencer's eyes glistened wide in the gathering dusk. Templar moaned softly in his sleep. The faucet dripped loudly. And the Captain's fingers closed about something smooth and yielding, yet plump with blood, a tick ripe for the bursting.

With a great brassy shout he drove his fingers through it. As his nails gouged through writhing jelly, the agonies of the thing's short-circuiting nervous system became hammer blows upon the base of his skull. Frantically, with numbing fingers, he tore at the connecting nerve links. He was a Siamese twin whose partner was death.

The floor spun by. A blazing nova, then galaxies of stars burned out his optic nerve and darkness struck. For an instant infinity equalled zero.

Then his good eye opened and puzzled at the mountain so close its wrinkled gray surface was a blur. As he raised his cheek from the floor the mountain became Hogan's trouser leg. The Captain felt his throat constrict. Painfully word-pictures forced themselves upon him. Hogan, Grimes, Hogan, Grimes, they whirled in a tightening circle of hysteria.

"Captain," Spencer's quiet voice broke the chain of self-recrimination. "Can you hear me, Captain?"

The Captain leaped erect and brushed a nasty mess of skin and jelly from his shoulder.

Think about it later; let the court of inquiry think about it, he told himself. You're their Captain, man. Act like one.

Swiftly he untied Spencer. Then, kneeling beside each of the three unconscious men, he carefully extracted the thing's progeny from their necks, twisting and bullying the tiny parasites until they drew in their nerve extensions and came loose in his hands.

In the icebox between the celery and the beer cans they resembled three over-ripe avocados as their frantic pulsations died away and the cold made wrinkles in their skins.

"When are you going to kill them?"

"The trans-galactic biology teams will want them alive. We will keep them in suspended animation the way the thing survived so long until we reach—." The Captain's voice faltered as he readied Templar's hypo; Ives was already groaning and trying to sit up, but he wanted Templar to awaken more gently. "—Earth."

"Earth," Spencer repeated solemnly. "Earth, Earth, Earth." Suddenly he smiled and the Captain's smile joined him.

They were going home.