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Ziff-Davis Publishing Company  
Editorial and Executive Offices  
One Park Avenue  
New York 16, New York  
ORegoo 8-7200  
Advertising Manager,  
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Midwestern and Circulation Office  
434 South Wabash Avenue  
Chicago 5, Illinois  
WAbash 2-4811

Western Office  
9025 Wilshire Boulevard  
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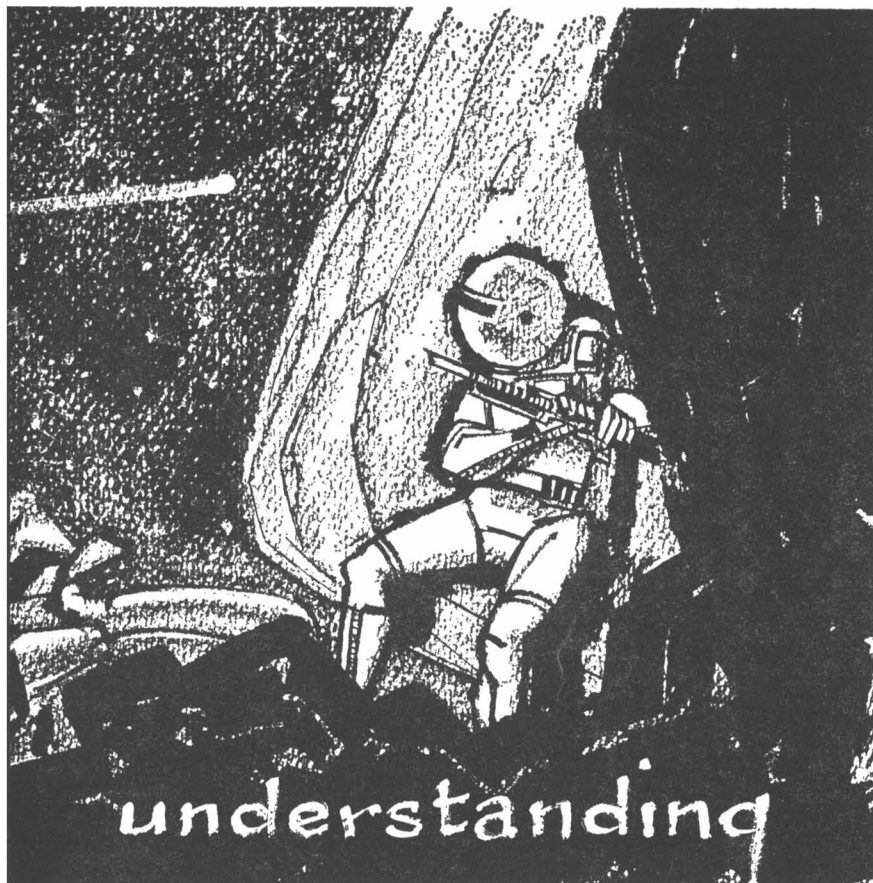


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*It seemed there was a way  
the Grull could be defeated. But neither  
the general nor the psych people could  
understand it. Neither could the Grull.  
That's why they were coming back.*

by **JACK EGAN**  
Illustrator **SHELLING**



**T**HE valley was black and cold with a thick hoarfrost, guarded by the enameled abyss of space. Ed Lockhardt dialed up his thermovers another notch and settled back against the frost-coated outjut of stone. He cradled the hand laser on his knees, photosensors full on, peering down the rifle sights of

the valley to its only entrance. Out there, somewhere, and getting closer every moment, were the Grull.

He closed his eyes, and they would have been grey had there been enough light to see them, tired of the endless panorama of the star sea, of the ragged, jagged Pandemonium supporting

that vastness. Dispassionately, for there was no room for emotion now, he reviewed the fiery death of the *Klystron* against the swirling miasma of Venus. And it was a funny thing, now that he had time (*oh, so much time*) to think about it. He had jumped ship at first sight of the oncoming Grull, panicked by their size and speed and grace of maneuver. The little L-boat (the one lying, fuel ex-pent, not far down that gouge of a valley) had barely made Mercury, though he utilized to the best of his ability the sun's gravity. Skimming in tight around the equator, he had slammed down into darkness with barely a check of his landing spot. In any case, it wouldn't have mattered. He had used every drop of water aboard the L-boat to get this far, feeding it milliliter at a time into the thermotubes.

AND here he was, Ed Lockhardt, ace-Cruiser pilot of the United Sirian Alliance, stuck in a little-tenanted nook of the Universe with a fleet of hopped-up aliens on his tail. The phono-coms were in A-prime condition, could reach anywhere in the immediate system. But reach what? Earth?

The island planet haughty in its old age and wisdom.

Ed knew better than to direct

signals toward that jealously-guarded pearl. Any suggestion that a ship of the Sirian Alliance was tainting the long-kept peace of the Terran System would bring only the stiffest rebuff from Alliance HQ, if not instantaneous death at the hands of the Terrans themselves. Better by far to take his chances with the Grull here, on a dead planet, where they and their bodiless minds would be at an equal disadvantage. True, the reward of a Grull captive was somewhat less likeable than death, but it was also more unsure. He might outwit them yet.

Something blurred the unwinking stare of Achernar in the River, and Lockhardt jerked his head back. The photosensors automatically increased current; the increment brought into full view the flake of phosphorescence floating high above him. A spynode, sent manhunting by the Grull Commander and his hungry wolfpack. Ed pictured the sleek grey darts hammering in from high above the ecliptic, chasing the lone Sirian spacer, all eyes covetously fixed on the only-too-well protected Utopia of Earth. But the Terrans were invincible, and lone Sirian spacers were not. So here he was, returning the bland stare of a Grull node, his neural shields banging into place, hoping to God he was not too late.

Presently the silver flake drifted on, passed a ridge of ice-gleaming peaks, and disappeared. Lockhardt heaved a sigh of mitigation, checked his oxygen supply, and found it wanting. So the Grull had missed the cracked-up L-boat this pass. Sooner or later one of their nodes would spot it, and then the whole hairy horde would descend, and give him his one and only chance for escape. But it had to be soon, or he'd be sitting here a pile of protein icicle, when the time came.

Hours dragged by. Ed knocked down his air-intake to the limit, then began to take advantage of the strict mind-training all Cruiser-class pilots must take before the U.S.A. would accept them for . . . extra-duty flights. Such as this one had been. Well, it still was. But not for long. Alliance had said, "Find the Grull." And he, Ed Lockhardt, hitherto unknown second-rate Cruiser pilot, had contracted to supply that demand. And he had—much good it would do him. As it turned out, Grull ships weren't quite as poorly-armed as was popularly believed; nor were they in the least bit timid of the newest model Sirian fleet ships, of which the ill-fated *Klystron* had been a member. Poor ship. It had been a truly remarkable chunk of osmiridium and steel, its positron-

ic brain as closely paralleling his own human personality as was mechanically practical. Life for it had ended there in the polar gravitic planes above Venus; and perhaps just as effectively the Grull had terminated Ed's existence. Free in a skiff because of a miraculous flash of foresight, he had been cut off from all but the most portable of weapons, all food, and from the only real means of communication to be used in a situation such as this: the inter-Galactic Ether Resonator. A truly hopeless situation; and perhaps it was for this reason that he felt so completely devoid of emotion.

SOMETIME later, a second spynode, or possibly it was the same one, came drifting in from another direction. Lockhardt watched it with interest, neural shields well in place, as the phosphor fleck spiraled over the darkness of the valley. It had sensed something, and that something must be the bent-up, battered little emergency cylinder that was the L-boat. The node stopped, hovering, and the photosensors in Ed's helmet showed the blacklight beam flick down and play over the pitted osmiridium hull amid the rocks. It glinted bluely with hoarfrost.

Then he saw them. Five grey, sleek shadows glided around the

edge of the planet, huge on the close horizon. Lockhardt felt a momentary stab of fear, bracing himself for what was to come.

*Grull!*

A long, black ripple slammed into the metascreens surrounding Ed's mind with a brain-searing release of neural energy. He rose to his feet and edged into the position behind the out-jut of rock he had so carefully picked after landing, surprised at his cold steadiness. The ether was first crackling with Grull propaganda, then with Grull inquisitiveness, and finally with Grull rage. The subvocal chatter emanating from the hulking ships was just under the tonal threshold of Lockhardt's psych, but carried far enough into his consciousness to put across the idea that the enemy had planned on finding him dead in his ship.

Now a search party was put out. Ed had the dubious honor of being the first living human to set eyes on the physical forms of the Grull. A nebulous, swirling cloud leaped an ozonic arc from the side of one ship to the ground beside the L-boat. It glowed with an evil mauve that flickered and flared across the death-cold landscape, raising up malignant shadows that flitted about with some strange life. For the first time since the *Klystron* disintegrated, Lockhardt felt an emotion: fear. The laser

rod in his gloved hand trembled with increasing frequency. What could a laser do against a creature such as that?

An increased background hum burned in his head, traveling along the nerve ganglia in an induced current. Lockhardt felt, rather than saw, the Grull discover his presence. The purple miasmatic aura settled over his hiding place, blotting out the stars in a thick curtain of tiny, fiery sparks. Ed felt the questing tendrils of the alien mind creep into his psyche, taking up the surface thoughts with puzzled probes; nothing happened until the Grull came up against the neural shield over his logic and speech centers, and simultaneously against the weaker blocks around the optic and audial nerves. Anger flashed from its mind into the continuum. Evidently a Grull considered secrecy proof of hostility. It demanded, in a mental way, to be let in. In answer, Lockhardt slammed into place all the newest neural blocks the Alliance had devised, covering even his touch sensors in his far-off, cooling toes. Almost instantly he felt the whiplash of carefully, maliciously-directed neural energy. The Grull had been aware of his decision, but a moment too late. Lockhardt cringed mentally under the assault, until he was suddenly certain that the mind-

locks would hold—at least for the time being. Then he broke out of the hellish aura into the gouged-out landing swath of the L-boat. Down at the ship two other Grull twirled in an eerie dance. He lifted his laser and sent a burst at them. Rock flared and dissipated in a hot vapor. No other effect.

**T**HREE more bursts at the whirlpools and two at the ships convinced Ed that further physical action would be useless. He knew he couldn't put up with the incessant brain battering much longer. Possibly the thought registered on the Grull, because the dim buzzing sound echoed louder in his skull. Lockhardt put his hand against his helmet in a futile gesture to cover his ears. He felt no panic, no fear, no emotion whatsoever. His mind was working along the sure rails of logic, and logic told him there was something distinctly wrong with the situation. The Grull had pulled no physical weapons to use on him . . .

Uh-oh. He had thought too soon. A flash of blue brilliance overhead, a white, searing blast against the L-boat. Well, that was that. No phonocom now. He couldn't reach Earth if he wanted to. Next target: him!

Strangely enough, he didn't run. Here he was, standing in the middle of a plainly-lit clear-

ing like a leaden ass, with the plosive racks of the enemy sighted right down his gullet. He still didn't move.

A Grull approached him, again its bearing radiating a question mark. Why won't this Sirian move? Surely he is no martyr. His mind shows no desire for self-destruction. Surely he is intelligent enough to comprehend the situation. Yes, he is intelligent. Why . . . ?

Lockhardt's mind struck.

It dropped the neural blocks and had leaped out to grapple the Grull intelligence before either Ed or the alien realized its intent. Then Ed's awareness was merged once more with his mind, and he felt it doing things it could never have done, that were impossible for a human being to do. It slashed with electrical sharpness into the relatively soft surface thoughts of the purile whirlwind. The Grull jerked, surprised.

What manner of flabby human is this that harbors such drastic, fearful amounts of mind force?

Surface thoughts stripped, Ed's mind locked around the Grull's psych in a crushing grip, and froze it. Then Lockhardt turned to the others, and even those inside the already-fleeing ships, and captured them in a like manner. After hours of nerve-racking fighting, captur-

ing, and questioning, Lockhardt stood on the deck of the Grull flagship, in command and deathly afraid.

What had he done? How had he done it?

Some seconds after the last Grull was clamped in stasis, the huge, resourceful well within his mind had quickly and quietly closed up, leaving no detectable psychic scar, other than the uncertain sorrow of having gained, and then lost . . . *something*. And there he had been (and here he was), more or less in command of the situation, directing the beaten Grull fleet back toward the Central Suns and home.

As the sleek grey fleet flashed past Venus, Lockhardt gave a silent salute to the grave of the brave ship *Klystron*. But it had not died in vain, because he *had* accomplished his mission. The small war party of Grull he had captured had already yielded to him the location of the main bulk of the Grull hordes, as well as a general knowledge of their weaknesses, militarily and socially. The United Sirian Alliance could use information like that. They could use a telep like Lockhardt, when he got back.

\* \* \*

**N**OW, just what is this about Ed Lockhardt's psych reports, Grunner?" U.S.A. General

Pauling asked, seated in an easy chair. Across the broad brown desk, Max Grunner's totally bald head shook in despair.

"I don't know," he croaked hoarsely, pulling at the ends of his white mustache. "I've never seen anything like this before. The Psych Analyzer shows an almost complete reversal of his old emotion patterns, plus a thousand odd discrepancies in habits, thought pattern, *et* very much *cetera*."

"Hmm," General Pauling perused the typed reports. "I can't say I'm really surprised. After a run-in with the Grull, anybody would be liable to change. He must have taken quite a mental beating. And, too, he was the first Sirian to see and capture one of the enemy."

The gnome-like Dr. Grunner stood and paced the room impatiently.

"But that is exactly the point, General. He *couldn't* have handled that situation, unless these changes in his mind-power had already been effected!"

General Pauling licked his lower lip and sent a green-eyed stare after the pacing psychologist. Already effected!

"So someone tampered with Lockhardt's mind before he met the Grull?"

"Precisely. Someone or *something*. It wasn't much of a shift; just a rechanneling of neural



energy here and there, and a few mind-blocks that could be broken down only if a certain set of circumstances developed."

"Which they did," Pauling mused. He looked up sharply. "Where is Lockhardt now?"

Grunner waved out one of the broad, barred windows that opened out onto Sirius's fifth planet. In the green distance could be seen a rather large group of white buildings, beyond which rose the needle spires of the spaceport. The Grull ships were thin shadows on the flight apron.

"Still going through Debrief. Had quite a set of burned-out ganglia. You know that new Doctor Hensen out of Procyon. Regular nut about strange psychoses."

"Another Grunner, eh?" the General smiled wryly, rising. "Well, thanks a lot for informing me, Max. I've got some loose ends to tie, and then I think I'll stop by for a check with your Young Doctor Hensen. Any new developments, just give me a yell."

They shook hands, then Pauling took the grav-drop to Power Center.

Buried a mile underground, the Thermonuclear Power broadcasting stations of the Dog Star were probably the most well-protected sites in the Galaxy, lying behind force- and psych-

screens no jamming device could touch without giving warning. Pauling was swept from the tips of his greying hairs to the last molecules of protein on his toenails by at least half a dozen sprays as he shot downward in the elecab. At Stage V he halted the cab and stepped out into a bright, anesthetic corridor.

Though the hall was lined with doors, the entrance he was searching for bore the faceplate Records, and he found it near the end of the channelway.

"Lo, Scotty!" he called through the open door, then stepped inside. The four walls were lined with chrysto-plates of past U.S. Alliance missions, the symmetry of the room marred only by a narrow, danger-red door in the opposite wall. He crossed the room and knocked on it.

"Be right out, Gus," he heard a voice say. Pauling leaned back against a table and examined his hands, wondering what he would find when the Record was dug up.

THE red door opened and a spacer of about the General's age stepped out. He wore a grin, glasses, and lab smock, and carried a new set of chrysto-plates.

"Well, how's business, Old Man?" Scotty Blake laughed shaking Gus Pauling's hand.

"Hot as Doradus. Damn Grull

have really been giving the Alliance a shakeup," Pauling was serious. "I'm glad to see you, Scotty, but I've got some important matters to clear up, and Records seemed a good place to start."

"Why sure, Gus. Have a seat. Just let me file these plates." He checked their catalogue numbers against the files and whisked the metal cubes into their pigeon-holes. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Pauling leaned back in the metal chair and stared off into space.

"You've heard the news, I suppose, that one of our men came back with some captured Grull?"

Scotty nodded his head. "Yes. And I was a little surprised it was Lockhardt. He's a telep, is he not? His is the ship that exploded in the Terran system about a week ago. How'd he pull it off?"

The General looked up at Blake curiously.

"We don't know." Then, "Have you got the chrysto-plate of his mission? I think Alliance HQ said #337-2-TLL. I've got it hypnoed in me somewhere. Yeah, that was it."

"Must. We record everything."

Blake hooked onto a sliding bench and checked along one wall. He reached up and pulled

out a little tray full of silver cubes arranged in neat stacks.

"Yep. Here's the newest mission cube. Want to hear it?"

"Please."

Scotty shoved it into the Analyzer and beamed the neuronics pickup at Gus. Pauling relaxed and closed his eyes and let his mind absorb the information.

*... forced to enter Terran system by small party Grull warships. All systems functioning A-prime, weapon supply good, food supply good. I am trying to get closer to the star to receive power for energy bolts and Ether Resonator. The aft screens show Grull at high ecliptic and overtaking. (Wavebeam beta—44 Galactic constant.) My pilot has all weapons on automatic, metascreens full on. Estimate five minutes to solar proximity. Approaching second planet (image:radio pip hot, cloudy planet against indeterminate green) and I notice ... I feel ... (((JUMP! PANIC! FEAR! JUMP!)))*

Pauling found himself clawing at the door of Records.

"Whew! That one was strong!" he exclaimed, feeling the adrenalin slowly leaking back into its reservoir. He flopped back in the chair, dripping with sweat. "No wonder Lockhardt got out, if that came through Control!"

"I should have warned you," Scotty apologized. "Some ships are more sensitive than others. Much more so than humans." He looked curiously at the little cube as he lifted it from the Analyzer. "But what was it? Grull mind contact?"

"No," Gus shook his head emphatically. "I've never beamed anything that strong before, and we've had plenty of mechanical Linkages with Grull minds. This was something different!"

Scotty toyed with the chrysto before handing it to Pauling.

"Had a talk with the pilot yet?"

"Nope. I was on my way over to Debrief when I thought of coming here. Now that I have his Record, I'd like to see what Ed Lockhardt has to say. We may have something important here. But I'm not sure. Not just yet."

He left Blake still checking over the *Klystron's* past Records, and took the grav-lift to the spaceport. A dense droning sound, reminiscent of a swarming hive of bees, vibrated through the heavily-padded channelways of the Sirian Terminal. It was the awe-inspiring thunder of the great Alliance ships, boring tunnels through the eternal night between the stars.

Out there Mankind was fighting a desperate war. A war to

the finish with a puzzling, vicious extra-Galactic race, and until now there had been no key to the enemy's weakness. Perhaps Lockhardt held that key. If he was Lockhardt.

DEBRIEF hung its shingle over the entranceway to an extremely small waiting room. Here Pauling sat cooling his heels while Procyon's Young Doctor Hensen decided to see him.

"You may go in, now, General Pauling," the metallic grillwork on the practical robot-secretary grated.

"Thanks," Gus said, but sarcasm was lost on the machine. Its fifty-two tentacles went back to the humming transcriber.

Hensen's office proved to be a relieving contrast to the almost too-functional outer office. Aside from the inevitable couch (now occupied by a snoring Ed Lockhardt, the General noticed), the windows were curtained in a pleasing yellow-on-green-on-grown, the lights were tinted an easy color, and the walls (wood paneling that smacked of femininity) were hung with abstracts of hyperspace, old starships, and full-color photos of the Dog Star. Pauling found himself staring in mild surprise at the woman bending over the Psych Analyzer at the head of the couch. She was dressed in

the white pull-overs common among hospital technics, but the suit appeared blue in the dim, tinted light. She straightened and her face was a soft oval nearly overpowered by wide, violet eyes. Her hair was long and blue-black, curling loosely around her shoulders. For several moments she allowed the General to assimilate the fact that so shocked him: she was *humanoid*, but not *human*!

"Y-you're Doctor Hensen?" Pauling stammered.

"Dr. Grunner didn't tell you?" she asked, smiling slightly. Her lips were a trifle wide, but well-formed. Her skin appeared peach, and her features were human. The eyes, Pauling decided, were the give-away. No Terran possessed optics of such hypnotic depth and color.

"You wish a Link with Captain Lockhardt, General Pauling?"

"Umm," Gus ascertained, regaining his composure. "I would, yes. But—"

"If you take the Link first, General, we'll have more common ground to hash over," she interrupted logically. Pauling appreciated her voice, if not the suggestion. He stepped over to the couch's console and allowed the Procyon to fit the analog-helmet over his greying hair. He nodded and the psychologist flipped a switch.

*... with the stars hanging over me, about to fall. Maybe if I wait longer, they'll slip up behind me! How can I shoot them if a laser has no ef—fect? Wait, I hear a sound. Maybe it's Them, inside me! Inside again! With the Power gone, how can I protect myse—*

CAPTAIN LOCKHARDT THIS IS GENERAL PAULING DO YOU REMEMBER ME

*—General? How can I hear the General when They are after me? Maybe it's another illusion. Maybe They . . .*

THIS IS GENERAL PAULING CAPTAIN LOCKHARDT YOU ARE IN THE PSYCH ANALYZER NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND

*. . . Psych Analyzer? General? Then I got back after all?*

YOU CAPTURED SOME GRULL ON MERCURY IN THE TERRAN SYSTEM ED YOU BROUGHT THE SHIPS BACK TO THE DOG DO YOU REMEMBER

*((((dim flickerings of Grull ships, boiling cauldrons of the Central Suns, growing disc of Siria V))))*

*. . . Yes. I remember now.*

CAN YOU REMEMBER HOW IT HAPPENED ED HOW DID YOU TAKE THE GRULL CAN YOU REMEMBER

*((((dim flickerings of control room of Klystron, boiling images of the Grull invader closing in, growing disc of Venus))))*

*. . . I . . .*

YOU WERE IN THE *Klystron*

WHEN THE GRULL STRUCK HOW DID YOU GET OUT IN TIME

(((((viewpanel showing empty space, no control units indicating enemy)))))

*. . . I thought I was free. I thought I had lost them. I was sitting in the pilot booth with the armament on automatic, and then the Grull showed. I dived into the Terran System—it was the only star nearby—to elude and recharge. I thought I could make it.*

(((((bright image cloudy planet, Venus. Bright image of the stars, and the five, glinting comets of the Grull ships)))))

*. . . I knew I wouldn't make it. Suddenly I was overcome; I noticed . . . felt . . .*

(((((JUMP! PANIC! FEAR! JUMP!)))))

**A**RE you all right, General" psychologist Hensen asked. She was holding him with two strong arms against the tiled floor, concern on her pretty face. Pauling stopped his thrashings and sat up, feeling adrenalin coursing hot through his veins.

"Wow," he moaned, holding his head. The taped electrodes of the analog-helmet had been wrenched off. "I should have been expecting that burst of emotion. I've already beamed the Record of the flight," he explained.

"I forgot that you were hu-

man," Hensen said. "We Procyons don't have adrenal glands. Otherwise, it is still a heavy neural shock. Whatever broadcasted that warning packed plenty of power into it."

The General stood up, lined face showing surprise.

"You mean, that wasn't Lockhardt's brain pattern?"

"Couldn't be," Dr. Hensen said. "No human mind in existence could support neutral currents of that magnitude without visibly enlarged brain cortex. And Lockhardt's brain x-rayed normal."

The General chewed that over for several moments.

"Any suggestions, uh, Dr. Hensen?"

"Well, you've had more psyched background to the situation than I have, but offhand, I'd say we're standing on the verge of a discovery that could mean a victory for the Alliance. Whatever Lockhardt did to them, it's left the prisoners in complete mental stasis for more than a week. From my Link with him, he used some mind-force to make the fleeing Grull ships come back to pick him up. General, Lockhardt must have developed some hitherto unknown mental powers—something no one has ever dreamed of!"

To say that the Procyon was excited would have been a gross understatement. Her violet eyes

glittered with some powerful emotion which Pauling sensed, rather than knew, would be completely alien to his own endocrine system.

Gus sat down in a handy chair and stared at his hands. With a new weapon such as the one Lockhardt seemed to have stumbled over, the Alliance would become invincible. Then their struggle to the stars would no longer be unequal in favor of the Grull, or any other alien life. Perhaps then Mankind would gain the guts to try the ghastly, awful, lives-consuming jump from this lonely star island to the next.

"General Pauling," the robot-secretary piped. "Phonocom from Alliance HQ. Mark IV."

Mark IV! The primary phone to Power Center!

"Here." Hensen indicated a wall screen. Gus stepped to it and flipped the COMMAND button. Immediately a colored test pattern resolved into one of P.C.'s chief technics.

"General Pauling!" he exclaimed, visibly relieved. Still the paleness of his face showed through a light spacetan. "The Space Force of the Sirian Fleet reported contact with a massed armada of Grull ships at twelve parsecs and closing. President Romley believes they're after Power Center."

"They would be," the General

agreed. "Get Dr. Grunner out to the spaceport immediately, and have the *Hellfire* fueled and weaponed. I'll be out there directly with Dr. Hensen." Pauling broke contact.

"Well, I gather I'm going along," the Procyon said with a barely-detectable trace of sarcasm.

"Right. And so is Ed Lockhardt. Is he under sedation or in a natural sleep?"

"Hypnoed. It's safer for a shock victim. But he can come."

"Umm. Do you have a portable Analyzer here?" His green eyes traced through the room. None in sight.

"No," Hensen smirked. "What for? I'm a licensed telep Class 2."

The General shot her a look of surprise. A Class 2? Whew! That was really notching it up there. Of course, Procyon's light held a different quanta ratio . . .

THEY sealed Lockhardt in a lead-lined protective suit and adjusted his walk-easies, carrying the still-unconscious Captain on the grav-drop to ground level, then transferred to Terminal taxi. As the fast groundcar sped across the bor alloy flight apron to the spindletop of the *Hellfire*, Pauling talked with Hensen.

"Naturally we would have been something more than first-

class dolts to think the Grull would let this discovery get any further than was absolutely necessary. Since Lockhardt's flight was completely traceable, and no telling what sort of spy apparatus is built into those captured ships, I'm not too surprised they're showing up. The fact that they're *en masse* only reinforces the assumption that the secret Ed has locked up in his skull is vital to the Galaxy. Why didn't you tell me before that you were a Class 2?"

The Procyon smoothed her blue-black hair into place and braced herself as the groundcar screeched to a halt before the General's starship.

"I didn't think it time. But I'm afraid I won't be able to help you much. Relay-beaming Records is just about the extent of my talents. I can't read minds too well."

Gus watched her face closely as she spoke. Something was eating away at the back of his mind, but as yet he couldn't reach it. He dismissed it as they piled out of the robot-driven car, pulling the unconscious Lockhardt with him. As the taxi jetted back to the Terminal, half a mile across the black apron, Pauling paused to stare up at the efficient-looking hulk of the *Hellfire*.

Here was the latest word in firepower and mass destruction,

and it pained him to call it his own. But it was, and as good a ship as ever sailed the starwinds. The positronic brain sported neural circuits remarkably resembling Pauling's own living nerve ganglia, as much a part of him when he was *en rapport* as were his arms or legs. It towered a hundred feet from the blastpad, carried two hundred thousand tons of water as fuel for its hungry thermdrive, yet was easily dwarfed by the three Sirian battleships parked a few miles away. It was armed, literally, to the teeth.

He mounted the force-ramp with an involuntary shudder.

"You have a beautiful ship," Hensen said. Pauling shot a suspicious glance at her face, but the large violet eyes were impassive. He merely nodded in reply, and directed the Procyon and the encased Captain down a narrow corridor to the sickbay.

Ed Lockhardt safely strapped in a grav-couch, Gus accompanied Hensen to Control, and slipped into a pilot booth beside her.

"My, aren't we intimate," the Procyon said sardonically.

"Only one pilot booth in Control, and I don't want you out of my sight. Dr. Grunner, when he gets here, can ride in sickbay with Lockhardt."

He punched the CLEAR PAD button with a disgusted jab. He

wondered where Max was; the psychologist should have been on board long before he and the Procyon arrived. Gus reached around the . . . girl . . . and fastened the grav-shield across both of them, then searched the viewpanels for sight of the Doctor.

HE'S on his way now, from Terminal Three," Hensen said suddenly. Pauling glanced at her, and her eyes were strained shut. The screen showed a black dot rushing out of the far building. A ground-car.

As it approached the starship, its speed increased. A strange feeling of apprehension started in his chest, quickly spreading to and gripping his stomach. He looked sharply, questioningly at the psychologist, at the same time pressing the Control bar.

The myriad pulsing thoughts of the *Hellfire's* brain wove a strangely-familiar, textured pattern of awareness through Control. Coupled with it were the low, subvocal echoes of what Gus identified as the Procyon's psych, thick with a growing prescience of approaching danger.

"What is it?" he directed at her.

A puzzled pause.

"I . . . don't know. I noticed . . . I feel . . ."

(((((LIFT! PANIC! FEAR! LIFT!))))))

Before Pauling could recover from the neural shock, Hensen's hands had flashed over the console, and the terrible, clawing clutches of heavy acceleration, unalleviated by the ship's grav field, tore at his body and dragged his mind down into unconsciousness. The *Hellfire* raised ground.

GENERAL PAULING THIS IS GWYN HENSEN DO YOU HEAR ME

*Gwyn? So that was her first name. Too bad she was an alien. What am I thinking about?*

GENERAL PLEASE WAKE UP THE GRULL (((image of many-tiered layers of grey, sleek darts against the shimmering curtain of space))) ARE UPON US I THINK I HAVE THE KEY BUT I NEED YOU GENERAL PLEASE DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME

*Why should I be hearing her voice. I'm dead. Why should I care about the Grull? It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing does. Go away, psychologist Procyon alien Gwyn Hensen. Go back to your alien planet and your alien star. Leave me alone.*

PLEASE GUS YOU DO UNDERSTAND ME I KNOW YOU MUST WAKE UP WE ARE IN THE *Hellfire* AND THE GRULL ARE CLOSE

*Why was I so afraid when we lifted. I could have sworn I'd*



felt that before. I know I have.  
*Back with Scotty Blake. Again  
with Lockhardt.*

*Lockhardt. He brought all  
this on us. If he hadn't found it,  
the Grull would never have  
dared come so close to the Dog.  
His fault. It? He shouldn't have  
found it? What did he find?*

PLEASE GUS FOR THE GALAXY  
FOR THE DOG FOR MANKIND FOR  
THE STARS PLEASE

*Why all this fuss I'm just  
dead. Why need me?*

THE Hellfire IS YOUR SHIP  
AND ONLY YOURS

*Oh. The ship won't obey her.  
She'll die too. A shame. She was  
so pretty, even if she was an  
alien.*

HUMAN I AM HUMAN

*Alien!*

HUMAN

*You lie! A Procyon! A telep!*

A MUTATION

*Ah? (((image of four-  
eyed purple monster, replaced  
suddenly, appallingly by a purple,  
swirling whirlpool of malign-  
ant sparks and horrible  
thoughts)))*

A GRULL! (((fear, pleading,  
waning hope))) PLEASE GUS  
WAKE UP THE GRULL ARE HERE  
THEY WILL BREAK THROUGH THE  
METASCREENS IN A MOMENT OH  
GUS—

(((PANIC! FEAR)))

\* \* \*

**D**OWN dark corridors Gus  
Pauling ran, driven by a

livid, pulsing torrent of fear.  
He skidded around a corner.

Oh God! *The Grull!*

A whirling, stabbing purple  
miasma of evilness lunged at  
him, and he turned and ran. He  
came to a steep stairwell and  
fled down it, past many floors,  
barely noticing the huge signs  
drifting, glowing greenly in the  
darkness before each level.

SPEECH

LOGIC

SIGHT

HEARING

SMELL

TOUCH

He glanced behind him, and  
the horde of Grull came plum-  
meting down. He shunted back  
his awareness of them, focusing  
on the darker, steeper stairs  
ahead of him, fear increasing in  
a vicious syndrome of emotive  
power and logic-freezing panic.  
The green sign floated before  
him:

LAST FLOOR: EGO

*Ego!*

The Grull were hunting down  
in his own mind, and he was  
trapped! Pinned against the last  
wall of existence, against him-  
self. He stopped on the lip of the  
abyss, halted by a far distant  
cry. It came from down the cor-  
ridor, from one of the millions of  
long, dark, twisting passages of  
his motor reflex centers. Gus  
stopped and listened, hearing  
the rushing cascade of bioelec-

trical static that was his own mind, balanced on the very edge of the black pit.

*Gus!*

So tiny. So far away. How could he expect such a puny, helpless voice to protect him from the Grull?

He glanced behind him, sudden anger and humiliation in the atmosphere. The Grull had driven him down into his own mind! Far into it, and were even now taking over his faculties. And here was the Last Outpost. The final stage before dissolution. As long as his consciousness retained a hold on the motor regions, the Grull were powerless to use his body. And here, if nothing else, he could end his own life with a sharp snap at the lifelines to the heart and lungs.

*Gus!*

That voice again. Closer, too. It came from the corridors somewhere ahead of him.

He turned and walked away from the last stairway, into the shadowy darkness, on all sides coursing the hidden messages from his body: ((( ( . . . physical violence against right calf, thigh, hip, rib cage (pressure on lungs great) arm, shoulder. Head spun violently in one direction, eyeballs lax, no signals from the balance organs [—of course not, Gus thought. *They've all been taken over by the Grull* —] lungs report foul air oxygen

content dropping . . . ) ) )  
GUS!

Gwyn!

He saw her now, crawling laboriously up the black corridor, and didn't stop to wonder how he saw her in the dark, or how he saw her at all. He ran to her and put his mind around her and suddenly the terrible fear was gone.

"Oh, Gus," she said, and her voice was strange, far-off. "Please. Listen. I think I can help us. Poor Lockhardt died from the acceleration, but I know now what his new power was. His *ship!* Somehow he Linked with its mind."

"The ship?" The tiny bit of memory he had strained to bring to the surface suddenly flowed along the ganglia of the channelway walls, and he reached out somehow and grasped it.

*Lockhardt was a telep, too!*

"Yes," Gwyn Linked in. "A telep, a mutant. That was why he never grew above a Captain in rank. They wouldn't trust too great a responsibility to an . . . alien."

GUS suddenly realized he was embracing her mind, and his ego and hers had merged. He ran along the little alleys of thought and emotion for a moment, not wanting to draw back to himself. Somehow he felt . . . complete.

"Quickly," Gwyn urged. "Follow me back. I think I have the key now. If we can merge minds with the ship, as Lockhardt must have accidentally done, the mental powers built into its brain, coupled with mine and yours, might give us the strength we need to overcome the enemy."

He ran beside her down halls of odd, filled emptiness, feeling the faint breath of thought and fear from the walls, sensing the Grull in pursuit, but he was safe. He was complete now, in some wonderful way, and the Grull could be hanged.

He emerged then, to his amazement, to awareness. He saw himself twisting madly on the sickbay table, and felt his arms stretching out to hold himself down. Three Grull were in the room, shedding unholy, purple light on the hospital equipment.

*Relax, Gus. You are in my mind,* came Gwyn's voice in his head. *It was the only way I could prevent the Grull from capturing your ego.*

He watched his—her—arm reach out and inject a heavy sedative into . . . Gus Pauling's arm, and was strangely relieved when the man stopped struggling in the restrainer, suddenly lax.

*Now, came the thought, we Link with the ship.*

Pauling's mind took over, and he guided the Procyon's body from sick-bay to Control, slid it into the analog harness, and clamped on the Control helmet. Behind him came the Grull, with their incessant mental battering rams that now had so little effect on his thoughts. They were harmless. They were less than harmless. They were doomed.

The Grull disappeared.

*Where did they go?* Pauling demanded. Again fear had its foot ensconced in the door.

*Link with the ship first!* came the brisk command.

He flipped the Control bar.

The quick, flickering intelligence that was the true entity *Hellfire* was suddenly present, its mechanical, powerful mind clicking along the routes of logic, dealing with the trifling technical problems of keeping the ship alive, and the more important task of watching for the enemy. Retained in its memory was the recent presence of Grull, and the metascreens had gone up, as planned. But now the screens were down, and the pilot-mind gone, and the Grull were gone.

Gone!

Search as they would, the combined intelligences of Gus, Gwyn and the *Hellfire* could not find them. The Grull were nowhere to be thought.

WHOP! The sound intruded.

Q. *What was that?* A. *Plosive shell amidships. Orders?* A. *Locate and return fire.*

Report: *done.*

Result?: *nothing.*

*Gus this is where the key was used by Lockhardt. He must have been en rapport with his ship (Klystron) when the Grull attacked. He retained its knowledge even after the ship was destroyed!*

*That's it! Hellfire, what do we do next?*

GRULL. STOP! FREEZE! I (WE) COMMAND YOU.

The three minds that were one reached out through space and seized the long grey shapes of the enemy that were already fleeing the not-understood happenings aboard the Sirian ship. Too late to stop them, Gus/Gwyn/*Hellfire* watched the warnings crackle out into the ether, the enemy's last words to his own kind: the dread message of defeat. The Sirians were invincible.

\* \* \*

*Feeling better?*

*You bet!*

Gwyn and Gus exchanged mental embraces as they sat waiting for President Romley of the United Sirian Alliance to speak. Across the richly-carpeted room in the Capitol Building on Siria V, sat Scotty Blake and

a team of P.C./Alliance psychologists.

"General Pauling, er, Doctor Hensen," the balding, rather plump Chief Executive began, "I can't tell you how much the Alliance thanks you for this truly remarkable discovery. It came at a time when it was most needed by the people of the Galaxy. I don't suppose I have to tell you that our federation was floundering in high seas." The President's black eyes strayed across the room to the psychologists. "I believe Mr. Blake has a few answers to the questions you may have in mind, and to several of my own. What about it, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes sir." Blake stood nervously and walked over to Gus and Gwyn. He carried a tiny silver cube in his hand, and it was shaking visibly.

"Dr. Grunner was killed when the *Hellfire* lifted, but the Psych Analyzer has already shown that he was under the compulsion of the Grull. To that effect, he was carrying a small but adequate thermite bomb on his person, and it was his intent to destroy the *Hellfire* and both of you, as well as Ed Lockhardt. As it was, only he was killed when the backwash of the starship smashed the bomb into detonation.

"As for your strange experiences with the mind-entity of

the *Hellfire*, I have only this to say:" CONGRATULATIONS!

General Pauling looked up with considerable surprise as Scotty's thought formed in his head.

"You too?" he asked.

"Me too," Scotty laughed. "And that psychographer over there has a complete Record of the whole mind-exchange that took place. Including—" he blushed— "a few personal aspects. P.C.'s working around the clock on new methods of co-opting pilots and ships, and feeding them power. And naturally the

Sirian Alliance Space Force is having a field day retraining its troops. You two have really set the race of Mankind up, you know. We have something now even Terra can't ignore!"

Not so many minutes later Gwyn and Gus and Scotty were taking the grav-drop to the housing center, and Scotty smiled as the other two kissed.

"When's the wedding?" he asked.

Gus and Gwyn laughed across at Blake. "We *are* married," they said.

**THE END**