

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, NO. 2 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • SEPTEMBER, 1951

► *Novel of Interlocking Space*

THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X *Theodore Sturgeon* 4

Gone were Earth's womankind. The Franx-blasted planet had been wrung of the young, the beautiful. Only Garth, son of Gesell the Great, knew the gateway to the prison-world—a world of 70-foot, man-stealing Giantesses.

► *A Startling Novelet*

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS *Poul Anderson* 84

A man without a planet, this 1,000,000-year-old Daryesh. Once Lord of a Thousand Suns, now condemned to rove the spaceways in alien form, searching for love, for life, for the great lost Vwyrdda.

► *Short Stories from all the Galaxies*

SANCTUARY, OH ULLA! *J. T. MacIntosh* 33

Shrewd Alganet paid off the war-bemused Ullans with back-firing images. His one wise mistake was to purchase a Ullan Woman.

THE INHABITED MEN *Margaret St. Clair* 44

Why was it, Gongo wondered, that the Earthman lying asleep in his space-freighter bunk whispered in so many alien voices?

THE STAR FOOL *Gordon Dickson* 50

The fate of star-colonies hung on blacked-out Tarn II and the only man within jet distance was ineffectual little Whaley.

LAST NIGHT OUT *Lee Gregor* 57

Tomorrow Ensign Grey and his hated, blue-furred space-mate, Canopus 43C, would go off to war—if tomorrow ever came.

TYDOR'S GIFT *Alfred Coppel* 67

Why should Tydore place such an inestimably valuable gift in the greed-hands of the Earthling whom he hated?

THE WATCHERS *Roger Dee* 71

It had taken him ten years to find them—to even convince himself that they existed. Now Manson was ready to kill.

VENGEANCE ON MARS *D. B. Lewis* 75

Should Hale give an ex-comrade to the torture-thirsty Hrai, or chance the massacre of Terrestrial thousands?

HOSPITALITY *J. W. Groves* 80

Eden could not have been half so good as this green jungle planet. Yet every Eden has its secret Serpent.

THE VIZIGRAPH Compliments and complaints from Planet's hardy readers 2 & 102

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

PLANET STORIES Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1951, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Registered as second class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 25¢ per copy. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.

SANCTUARY, OH ULLA!

by J. T. Mac INTOSH

Too smart, too shrewd, this fugitive from the Galactic Patrol. Alganet paid off the war-bemused Ullans with cheap back-firing images. His one wise mistake was to purchase a Ullan Woman.

AL GANNETT HAD ALWAYS been smart. "I don't brag about it," he used to say modestly. "I can't take any credit for it. It just comes natural." Another of his maxims was: "Some people do everything the easy way. Not me. I sometimes take the hard way, just for practice."

It had been the hard way all right, when he went in for space piracy, to prey on the millionaires' ships instead of tramps nobody cared about—too hard, perhaps. Anyway, he left Sol's system in a tiny ship without his loot, without his mob, and with half the G. P. on his tail. Some people might have said he hadn't been so very smart. But Al thought philosophically as he shot across space to nowhere in particular: "Maybe I did bite off more than I could chew. But, boy, look at what I bit!"

Which, in a way, was smart. He could also console himself—and did—with the reflection that not everyone got a sendoff from half the Galactic Patrol. And being Al, he was planning even before he had slipped the great ships thundering in his wake.

He had very little to help him to plan. He was alone, his ship was stripped for speed, and he had nothing but a copy of the Green Book as a starting point. So he started from that.

The Green Book is the guide to nowhere, where Al was going. A new edition comes out every year, and Al's was only three weeks off the presses. He had been buying it every year for a long while, always meaning to read it when he had the time. Now he had the time.

The Green Book contains not a word about anything in Sol's system, but everything that is known about all stars, dead and alive, all planets and all nebulae outside it. It is small as treatises go, because the operative word is 'known'. A possibility can't get into the Green Book. Even a probability hasn't much hope. Nothing less than reasonable certainty has more than the chance of a banana split at a children's party with the editors of the Green Book.

Without any sort of selection Al began to read. But he was used to finding what he was looking for, by the simple process of deciding he had been looking for what he found. And before he had finished reading the section on Ulla his plan was complete.

"Boy," he said to himself softly, "that'll show them."

Ulla was the second planet of the small star Morn, invisible from Earth and even from the new observatory on Mars. Morn was only some twenty light-years from Earth, but it was such a little star that its light gave up on the way. But Ulla in



Then at last the fleet was back. But there were no lights . . .

compensation, was only some fourteen million miles from its sun, and was remarkably Earthlike. It was the same geological age as Earth to a day—as geological age went—had a mass equal to that of Venus, an atmosphere that was the twin of Earth's, and was populated by a humanoid race—possibly a human race.

There had been some communication with the Ullans, said the Green Book, but it had been discontinued because the Ullans had human intelligence, human belligerence, and might be dangerous. The Ullans' attitude had been, Al read, translating as he went for his own benefit, "Hands off, or we'll poke you in the belly. We're doing all right. Maybe we can lick you, maybe not. But we're ready to try. Make one wrong move and we'll come out swinging."

There was more of it, and when he had read it all Al summed up aloud. "They don't like us one little bit. There's nothing they'd like better than to lick the pants off the G. P. and the rest of the system. But they think just possibly we might lick the pants off them.

"Point two," he went on, "from the way this is written the G. P. isn't quite sure either. Earth takes anything it can get. But it's not sure it can take Ulla. So? So this is where Al Gannett comes in."

He pointed his ship towards Morn. The G. P., he observed, seemed to have given up the chase.

YES, ULLA LOOKED amazingly like Earth. There was more land surface, land teeming with Ullans, according to the Green Book. Al had written the estimated total population in the margin, complete with all the zeros: 7,000,000,000,000. It was impressive for a planet only four-fifths the size of Earth, and with some pretty big seas. That, he thought, could be a lot of cannon fodder. He dropped his ship lower and lower.

His reception was mixed. He landed near a huge grey city, and when he came out there were a lot of Ullans waiting for him. They didn't fall on his neck, but no one shot him. They were very careful, the Ullans.

They were also, he noticed with pleas-

ure, near enough human to make no difference to him. That is, the Ullan girls were contoured on a familiar but not uninteresting pattern. It would be the men he would have to work with, but he had always known there was more to life than work.

Illogically, like all races greeting a member of another, they were talking to him. He grinned, shaking his head. Then he tried to tell them he had a message for them, but would have to learn their language first. He didn't know whether that got across. But his second effort at communication did. At first they clearly thought they must have misunderstood him, but he hammered patiently at his point until they took it in. He was giving them his ship. It was theirs. They could destroy it, fly it, or take it apart, as the spirit moved them.

Their surprise at this gave him a chance to observe them more closely. They—the girls, of course; why should he look at the men?—were smaller than Earth girls, with other major measurements in proportion. Their skin was faintly yellow, exactly like pure Chinese, but there was nothing Oriental about their features. The cheekbones were Slav, the mouth French, the eyes Arabic. The hair was black and oily and rather unpleasant. But a few had lighter, really beautiful hair. Pick one, he told himself, very tall for her race (five feet three), blonde as Ullans went (rich chestnut), unusually plump (waist 24) and with big feet (a little over half the size of his), and she could walk down any Terran street and pass as an Earthling and a lovely one at that.

He knew he was safe. He had left the Green Book somewhere behind in space. For curiosity, if nothing else, they had to keep him safe at least until he knew their language. As a prisoner, perhaps; but that suited him. Back on Earth he would be a prisoner or worse.

It was a pity, he thought, about their clothes. A plain smock, even well-fitting and neat, even worn over nothing in particular, could never be very attractive. It wasn't even a dress—just a simple thing with plain round holes for arms and neck, falling as a short skirt to the knees.

He became aware that while a crowd almost hid the ship from sight, a man beside him was pointing to objects and giving them names. Hell, he thought, that was going too far. He wanted to learn the language, sure, but they might at least give him time to look around or sit down somewhere before they sent him to school.

It was time he did something to assert himself. The man was a foot shorter than Al. He pushed him gently but implacably aside and let his eyes rove around. Almost at once he found her—the girl who could walk down any street on Earth and have a lot of interest taken in the fact.

"Okay," he said. "If I must have a teacher, you're it. Start talking."

It took them a surprisingly short time to reach an understanding . . .

AS THE WEEKS went by Al marveled at his luck. He almost decided not to go through with his plan, things were so good as they were. But when he thought how all the things that could have been wrong fitted so neatly into the plan formulated before he had even seen Ulla, it seemed to him that he was meant to go on with it.

One afternoon as he lay in the cool sunlight—it warmed, but didn't burn as Sol did, on Earth and Venus, at any rate—he realised it was time for the next step. He opened his mouth to speak to Vellin, the tutor he had chosen, then shut it again, looking at her with pride.

The Ullans had met him halfway. He was still a prisoner, but the fact was not constantly impressed on him. He had reasonable freedom and every comfort while he learned the language.

Vellin had met him more than halfway, but, to his great regret, not much. She was sitting there placidly, dressed in the outfit he had designed for her—the less said about that the better—but she was still his very official tutor, despite all the modifications he had tried to superimpose on the relationship. She smiled, she laughed, she treated him almost as a brother, she talked of what he wanted to hear, she taught when he was ready to be taught and relaxed when he wanted to relax. But . . .

She hadn't been a member of Ullan Se-

curity when he picked her out. She had been a mill worker—which was a hard life, and she was glad to have a rest from it. When he selected her as his tutor she had immediately been appointed an acting officer in Security—he knew all about that—and at once had an even harder life, spending most of the day with him and the rest being coached herself, so that she could instruct him. There was no secret about that either. She had to learn a lot more about the language than she had known, and more about Ullan customs, resources, psychology and a dozen other things. She didn't necessarily tell all this to Al—but she had to know it. She had to know not only what to tell him, but what not to tell him.

So altogether she exchanged a tough job for an even tougher one. But she seemed happy. For one thing it was a complete change from anything she had known. For another, she didn't work all the time when she was with Al. And one more factor: she experienced from him another thing she had never know before—unconcealed admiration. Among her own people she was just a girl—too tall, too fat, too half a dozen other things. Not ugly, just not pretty. But Al—well, Al had never pretended to be indifferent to women, nor pretended to them that he was.

"Vellin," said Al at last. She looked up with that gratifying attention of hers. "Vellin, I'm ready to talk now. I think I've got the hang of this language of yours. It's not hard, not if you're smart. I wasn't going to talk until I was sure I could make myself understood and understand everything that was said to me. But now I talk as well as you. Better maybe."

Vellin nodded, smiling. "You have a tongue that can break stones," she said. It was a compliment, in the unpoetic Ullan language.

"Well, bring on a few boulders," said Al. "The high-ups, mind. I don't want to talk to some tenth-rate Security officer."

"Security officers are never tenth-rate," said Vellin mildly. "I'm not tenth-rate myself now. I'm very important." She said it with the happy wonder of a child.

"So they must expect something from me," retorted Al. "And maybe they're right."

"I WANT Vellin there," said Al decidedly.

"Certainly," agreed Maber, the only officer apart from Vellin that Al had seen so far. "But not . . ." He glanced at her in distaste. A plain girl dressed like a peacock looks even more like a very plain girl. And to Maber, Vellin was only a little above hideousness.

"No, she's got a uniform," said Al. "So have I. Give us ten minutes."

And in ten minutes tutor and pupil met outside the conference room—the biggest room in Al's chalet. Al nodded, satisfied, and Vellin looked at him in open admiration.

Al was too smart to wear a gaudy, too splendid uniform. He and Vellin entered the room in plain grey tunics with silver buttons, razor-edged grey slacks, and shining black shoes. Only a subtle but quite sufficient modification of cut allowed for the difference in sex. In the uniforms he had designed he and Vellin were very impressive indeed, Al knew, even to Ullans. That was the idea. And he wasn't unaware of the advantage he gained by having Vellin in similar uniform to his. It was like gaining an ally.

There was a formal presentation ceremony. There seemed to be no rank in Security. Everyone was just an officer. There were Al and Vellin, Maber, and two men he had never seen before, Holn and Ader.

Al didn't waste any time. First he told them a little of what he had learned about them. They never, as a people, went back on their word. He could trust them, he said. (Al had never trusted anyone, but this was one time when he had no choice). So if they gave their word that he would be treated well, as one of them, he was ready to take it. That was all he wanted. He never meant to go back to Sol's system.

"You wish your gift of your spaceship," said Maber, "to pay for your acceptance among us."

"No," replied Al. "I can give you a lot more than the spaceship. And in return I want no more than I've already asked."

The others glanced quickly at Vellin, trying to read something from her expression. But she betrayed nothing, neither knowledge nor, in this case, ignorance.

"You're afraid of Earth," said Al softly. There was a stir. No one ever told an Ullan he was afraid of anything. "You're afraid," Al insisted, "and you're jealous. You'd attack if you knew enough, and thought you'd succeed. But you don't know enough, and you might not succeed. Well, I can tell you what you want to know. From me you can learn whether to attack or to leave Earth alone. And remember, whatever happens, I'm one of you. Whatever happens, I take it as an Ullan."

"You could have been sent," said Holn, "to make us attack."

"Why? The advantage is always with the attacker. If Earth wanted to fight, she'd attack. But she's scared as you are."

"But how can you help us, Al?" asked Vellin, giving away her ignorance. "You're no technician."

"I can answer that," said Maber. "Alganet already knows more of our science than you do, Vellin. Or can apply it better. From a man we can deduce the optimum level of technology of his race. Alganet is clever. He is an Earthman. From him we can discover the task that would be before us in an attack on Earth. We need only him and his spaceship."

HE LOOKED searchingly at Al. "Yes, you are very clever, Alganet. You knew we would do this anyway. So you offer it freely, and ask a small price. We agree, naturally. And the initiative is with you, not us."

"One thing I want to ask," said Holn. "Alganet, why are you betraying your system?"

"'Betray' is a hard word," said Al easily. "Maybe I don't like Earth as it is. Maybe I like you. Maybe I think it would be better for both if you stepped in."

"That point of view is not inconceivable," Holn admitted.

"Then . . .?"

"I have answered you already," said Maber. "Taking you as the optimum Earthman . . ."

"I wouldn't do that," said Al modestly. "There's some pretty smart boys on Earth. I've run across one or two."

"Taking you as an intelligent Earthman then, as you must be, and your ship as a

recent product of your technology, we can find both your race's potentialities and the point it has reached. The technique has been highly developed. Of course we follow your plan, Alganet. You are ready to submit to the most rigorous mental and physical examination?"

"I've said so, haven't I?"

"No—merely implied it. But if you are, then in a year's time we should be ready for war. If we have a good chance of success, we'll take it."

"I knew you would. You're afraid of Earth, and afraid to leave her alone. So because you're afraid, you'll fight. I know Ullan psychology too, Maber."

IT WAS STRANGE that Vellin had to be compelled to marry Al. She had always liked and admired him—which to an Ullan meant she loved him. But perhaps Security didn't handle her right. They told her it was desirable to have all possible holds on Alganet, and that he had expressed his willingness to marry her. It was only necessary, in their view, to instruct her to marry him.

She didn't rebel because it was impossible for her to think of rebellion. She accepted the verdict that it was part of her job to marry Al.

But Al didn't want that. "No girl marries me because she has to," he told her bluntly. "If you don't like the idea, fine. I'll tell Security I've changed my mind."

Vellin gasped. "Don't do that," she begged. "They'll blame me. They'll think I—"

"They'll think what I tell them to think. Sure, maybe I'll have to leave them with a vague suspicion that you must have handled me the wrong way. But if you can only marry me as a duty, baby, I'm dealing myself out."

Vellin's only answer to the first real mental problem of her life was to burst into tears. Al looked at her thoughtfully. Try to comfort a weeping woman and you only make yourself look silly, he thought. Al had never made a habit of looking silly. It was one of the many things in which there was no percentage.

"Okay," he said, "mop up and stop making a noise. It only means I have to talk louder, and why should I waste my energy?"

I'll tell you what I'll do, Vellin. I'll give you time to make up your mind. I was always a patient guy. I'll tell Security I'm in no hurry to get married. Any time you change your mind, let me know. If you keep on thinking it's your duty to marry me, after a while I'll tell Security you're not my type."

Vellin had stopped crying, but there was still doubt in her face. "But it is a duty," she said. "I don't understand what you want. I"

"Look, baby," said Al dispassionately. "You've heard of a thing called love, haven't you? You Ullans don't talk about it as much as we do, but you still know about it. I've had women in love with me, and I didn't marry them. But one thing's sure—before I do marry any girl, she has to be in love with me. Believe me, if it ever happens to you, you'll know it."

He sighed. "I suppose I must be half in love with you myself," he admitted, "otherwise I wouldn't take so much trouble over you. You may be dumb, but I like you. And that's more than I ever said to any Earth girl."

When Vellin looked at him there was something in her eyes that showed him he wouldn't have to wait long before she knew what he was talking about.

THE DAY CAME when the ships began to take off, one every thirty seconds for thirty-five days. Ulla was a single minded, industrial planet. In a year it could have built ships for its entire population. Instead it built some hundred thousand great ships of war, not as fast as the G. P. ships Al described, but heavier and twice as deadly. As that vast navy took off and gathered in space, Al felt almost sorry for the civilization built round Earth.

It was a long wait, and there was nothing for anyone on Ulla to do but wait. Except Al, who had always been good at waiting and finding something useful to do. The end of a wait had often meant success, riches, luxury for a while. Even oftener it had meant getting smoothly on the run, so during any wait there was always the job of preparing for escape, just in case.

He didn't think it necessary to prepare

for leaving Ulla in a hurry. But it was so much a habit, and had served him so well, that he made his preparations as usual.

He was no longer a prisoner. The Ullans knew he had thrown in his lot with them, so they didn't have to guard him any more. The tests he had gone through were enough to convince them he was sincere.

His own ship was out of the question as a means of escape, but one of the first jobs the Ullans had done as an experiment had been duplicating it. One night Al went back to something he hadn't done for a long time—he did a job himself, and did it well. He hadn't lost his talent. He left a yard blazing, evidence of how the fire had started—a faulty fuse—and so much damage in a limited area that no one could ever discover that the wreckage of one of the small experimental ships was missing.

Yes, it was a good job. Al thought of it with satisfaction. He had never done a better job. He had his ship, no one knew it, and he hadn't even had to kill anyone.

The only problem had been what to do with his ship when he had it. But that had been fairly obvious. It had to be close at hand. So Al put it in a cellar and walled up the entrance. He would have to blow up the wall to get to it. But that wouldn't matter if he was making a getaway.

He reassured himself again. It wasn't likely. But it was smart to be ready for anything.

Then he went back to giving Vellin plenty of opportunity to appreciate his good qualities. So if the time had passed slowly for Ulla, it didn't hang heavily on Al's hands.

Then at last the fleet was back. Every one on Ulla saw it, everyone looked up—for the ships converged on their landing-grounds all over the planet at once. Everyone feverishly sought the lights of victory. Everyone tried to believe the ships were ablaze with light.

But there were no lights. It was defeat.

Al stared like the rest, Vellin at his side. He counted the ship automatically. Seventeen. There had only been eighteen from that field. One missing—only one. Seventeen of them might have been missing, and the one that was left might have returned blazing with the lights of victory.

Seventeen back—did it mean there had been no conflict at all? But then there would have been flashes, not seventeen dark, silent ships dropping to the field.

"Well," he said harshly, turning to Vellin, "whatever went wrong they'll blame it on me. I didn't tell them Earth had this or that. I misled them in saying so-and-so. My ship must have been centuries out of date. That's what they'll say.

"You were smart after all," he added. "You didn't link yourself to a failure—or someone your people will call a failure. Look what you saved yourself from. The wrath of a whole beaten planet that has to work it off on someone else."

Vellin said nothing, but the hurt in her eyes made Al wish he hadn't been so bitter.

PRIDE OR CAPRICE made Al receive them in his uniform. He had never been in any army; but somehow he had more control over himself in that neat, sober costume that made him look as if he were somebody.

The obvious thing for him to do, of course, was to make his escape while he could. But Al was curious. He couldn't leave without discovering exactly what had happened.

Besides, he was in no hurry to decide all was lost. It was still possible that a bold stroke—a typical Al Gannett manoeuvre—would save for him all he seemed to have lost.

Vellin wore her uniform too. Al didn't know quite how to take that. Was she facing both ways? Then he saw it, and a glow of confidence ran through him. She was backing him. Her world had been beaten, but not Alganet. He would never be beaten.

Lightly, just before Maber arrived, he kissed her. She stepped back quickly, surprised. Ullan love-making was torrid, with nothing of tenderness in it. She had never encountered gentleness—and probably never expected it from Al.

Maber came with two officers unknown to Al. That was good, Al thought—a ceremonial approach. A high official like Maber wouldn't come to drag him away personally.

"Holn and Ader are dead," said Maber coldly. "You are responsible for their

deaths."

"I thought that would be the line," retorted Al with equal coolness. "It's all my fault, is that it?"

Maber stared at him levelly. "We're not vindictive, Alganet," he said. "And you were sincere. We still know that. But thousands of our men have died—"

"And you need a scapegoat. That's nothing new. But first—what happened?"

"A patrol met us. Twenty ships. Twenty ships against a hundred thousand. We used our vibration ray. Nothing happened. They must have some insulation that damps it out. Or a screen that stops it. We tried our energy beam. They sucked it in. They took all we could give them and swung in front of the ships that had sent out no beam, as if asking for more. We tried missiles. Their radio brushed our control aside and they sent the missiles back. Some ships were destroyed then by their own shells. We tried unguided missiles. They curved slightly and shot past the Earth ships.

"But why go on? They made us show them every trick we had. They were brave men in those ships. They must have met us expecting to be blasted to nothing. Probably they only hoped to delay us until a larger force arrived. Then they found they could handle us without help—one ship to five thousand of ours. They kept inviting us to produce our strongest weapon, whatever we'd kept in reserve.

"We had nothing in reserve," Maber went on heavily. "We were weaponless. We might as well have left our vibration ray and energy beam and rockets and everything else back here. They were cautious at the start. But soon they saw we represented no problem.

"Then we tried to pass them. We thought we might accomplish something by sheer numbers. We drove on towards Earth.

"When they saw what we were doing, they began to pick off our leaders. Holn and Ader were in one of the first ships to be destroyed. The Earth ships used a beam concentrated to the thickness of a finger. I don't know whether it was a heat ray or not. But it could hardly touch a ship without destroying it. Imagine a hole driven right through a ship, through every-

thing in its path. But usually they swung their ray and it cut ships in half. Sometimes two or three at a time. Still we drove on, with the twenty Earth ships darting about among us.

"Soon we saw that not a single ship could ever reach Earth. At the rate we were being eliminated, the whole fleet would have been gone long before we got within striking distance of the inner planets."

"And it wouldn't have made any difference," said Al, "for they're fortified more strongly than the whole fleet, let alone twenty ships."

"When we turned, they left us alone," said Maber bitterly. "They lost interest. We were only a toy fleet."

THEY STOOD in silence for a moment. It might have been a remembrance ceremony for the dead dreams of conquest formulated at previous meetings.

"They'll be here soon," said Al. "They won't destroy Ulla. They'll be civil and polite, but they'll still be conquerors. There will be trade, and Ulla will benefit—but on Earth's terms."

"But you," said Maber softly, "won't be here to see it."

Al laughed. He didn't feel as brave as he looked. No one could be. He was in a tight spot, and perhaps he should have escaped while he could. But to where?

"Threats, Maber?" he taunted. "I've heard threats before, in a dozen languages, on a score of worlds. But I'm still here."

"And alive," Maber admitted, "for the moment."

They saw no movement. One moment Al was smiling coolly at them, the next he was holding a blaster that covered them all.

"I admit this is a poor argument," he said, "but it lends force to what I have to say."

"You're mad," Maber told him. "What do you think you can accomplish, on a world where everyone is against you?"

Vellin was behind Al. Tensed, he could hear her excited breathing and moved gradually so that he could cover her also.

But he paid too much attention to Vellin, who didn't matter, and Maber, who

was merely trying to hold it. He whirled as he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. One of the officers had drawn a blaster, not the ceremonial gun at his belt, but another weapon from his shoulder. And as he flicked his own blaster round Al knew he was too late.

There was a faint hiss, and the officer was staring at the stump of an arm. Blaster and hand had disappeared in a flash of blue flame.

It was safe for Al to turn his head. Vellin, her blaster still levelled, was white but determined.

"Thanks, Vellin," he said. "You're with me, after all?"

Vellin, tensed and resolute, didn't answer. But it was an unnecessary question.

"Two traitors," said Maber harshly. "A traitor to Earth and a traitor to Ulla. You make a perfect pair. What now, traitors? Do you think you can escape?"

"Tie that man's hand before he bleeds to death, Vellin," said Al. "He may be needed yet."

HE TURNED BACK to Maber and grinned crookedly. He was beginning to sense something he didn't like. But he had never been afraid to face facts. It wasn't smart to deny things which were obviously true.

"I don't think you told me the whole story, Maber," he said. "Why blame me? What did I do wrong?"

Maber smiled too, and there was no more warmth in his smile than in Al's.

"According to the picture we had of Earth, nothing like this could have happened," he said. "They were a race on our level, we thought, with a certain superiority in technique and experience which could be overcome by numbers and surprise. That was the picture our scientists built up from their study of you and your ship.

"But," he went on slowly, "there was one wrong inference. Your ship was all right. But you—we thought you were clever. You thought yourself clever, and you seemed so to us. But, Alganet, we were both wrong. Our defeat shows plainly that you must be a very ordinary Earthman. Perhaps even stupid. It was in believing in your high relative intelligence

that we made our mistake. If we had had only two Earthmen for purposes of psychological comparison, we could have found the probable variation in level of intelligence, and realized we hadn't a chance."

Al felt a wild urge to shout and rave that Maber was wrong and that he was smart and had always been smart. That Maber was covering up for the Ullan scientists' mistakes. That they had simply failed to realize how smart he was.

Instead he said evenly: "That's not my affair. You said we couldn't escape, Maber. You were wrong. I was smart enough to plan even for this. We could escape right now—but we won't. You need me, Maber. You may not like it, but that doesn't alter the fact. Stupid, am I? I'll show you just how stupid I can be."

He put away his blaster. It was merely a gesture. He could have it out again before Maber could move. But it was a good gesture. He said over his shoulder: "Vellin. Put away your gun."

She hesitated in disbelief. Then as she saw that Al meant it, she slowly pushed the blaster back in her belt.

"Go on, Maber," Al invited. "Two traitors. What was it you were going to do?"

"You said. . . ." Maber stumbled on the words. "You said we needed you."

"You'll always need me, Maber," said Al. "I may not be smart on Earth, but I'm smart here. Maybe some day I'll have to move out—when some bigger operator moves in. But meanwhile, Maber, you need me to meet the envoys from Earth and talk to them—and that's only the beginning. I'll get better terms than you would. They won't like me—they chased me out. You don't like me either. But you'll both need me as a go-between for a while."

"Earth will demand you as a criminal," Maber retorted. "Besides, we're conquered. They won't treat with us, they'll tell us what they want."

Al shook his head slowly. "You don't understand economics. There are over 7,000,000,000,000 Ullans, and this is an industrial planet. Earth can't rule Ulla. You forget that. It would need too much power and too many men to keep Ulla subjected. Can't you see that?"

He grinned as Maber brightened. "But Earth will have to keep that vast potential in check," Al went on, "and the only way is trade. We'll be rich, Maber. Have you no imagination?"

He made a derisive gesture. "As for Earth demanding me as a criminal, they'll think twice about that when I have seven million million Ullans behind me. And I will have, Maber, won't I?"

It was Al's greatest coup. He had said just enough—enough to show the brighter possibilities and conceal the difficulties. But difficulties, Al thought contentedly—I thrive on them. Vellin was a difficulty, and she came round in the end.

She had made up her mind now. One

glance at her showed she thought there was no one in the galaxy like Al. And Al wasn't the one to deny it.

"It's only a respite," said Maber. "It can't last."

Al grinned, and this time there was a whole world of amusement in his smile.

"My whole life has been made up of respites," he said. "I'm always sitting on top of a volcano, Maber. I like it. There's no fun in doing things the easy way."

"But maybe this time I'll try to make it last." He put his arm about Vellin's waist. "I never tried it before. But now I've got responsibilities.

"It's a new feeling," he added thoughtfully.

