

# ASTOUNDING

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Illustrations by M. Isip, R. Isip, Kramer, Binder, Rogers, and Schneeman.

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# THE SCRAMBLER

By Harry Walton

**They caught something that time—something more than they wanted. And general, scrambled hell broke loose on the ship as a result!**

Illustrated by Schneeman

"CLOSE HAUL, men. Let him hit the net—that does it!"

Spacesuited men clinging to the *Argonaut's* life lines gripped the net tighter as their prey floated into it. A reddish-white globe ten feet in diameter, it evidenced life only by a rhythmic swelling and shrinking of its bulk, like an animated bellows there in the airless reaches of space.

"Hold all! Close around now—"

The exultant voice of Matt Brend, captain, fell silent in astonishment. For the thing had breasted the net—and was flowing through it like water through a sieve. Whereupon eight men held slack lines, and upon the ether was borne a torrent of spaceworthy oaths. Men who knew Matt Brend, smiled grimly and reached for the repulsors at their belts.

"Follow me. Blast!" The words cracked like shots. "Ahoy, *Argonaut!* Two inductors full tension on the net lines. We'll see if the thing can eat juice."

Again the net was flung into a cupped semicircle across the globe's path, mesh aglow with cathode current from the ship's generators, men and lines pricked out against black space by pale, fiery discharge fringes. The globe kept on. Men braced themselves for the strain that this time must come.

Now!

From eight men rose howls of anguish. Brend, pale behind his helmet, bellowed orders in a voice taut with pain as the penetrating cathode current touched the quick nerves no man is aware of until caught in an open "cat" line.

"Juice off, *Argonaut!*" And again Brend voiced those choice expletives that were the pride of his hard-bitten crew, for even now, with the current still on, the reddish-white globe was drifting serenely through the charged net.

Once beyond the mesh, it paused beckoningly.

"I'll be a tadpole, Cap, if the thing isn't thumbing its nose at us," murmured one man as the agonizing current died out.

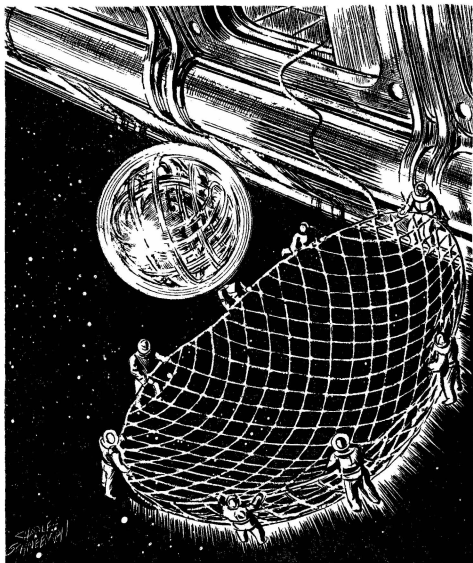
"Bilge-dust!" growled Brend. "What I'd like to know is how it opened the net circuit without damaging the mesh."

"Maybe it's that superhuman intelligence you're fond of telling us about," mocked a third voice. "In that case, captain, you can ask it—after you've caught it."

Brend grunted, rubbed his legs and thighs to restore circulation impeded by the cathode shock.

"Belay the net," he snapped. "Lectronbars out."

Skillfully the great net was folded away. Along the lines slid the electronbars, gaunt of barrel and crazy



*The thing—whatever it was—was finally maneuvered into the catching net and hauled inside.*

with inductance drums and capacity batteries. Each man unsnapped one from the line and cradled it in one arm. Expertly, the eight hurled themselves, by means of repulsors, five hundred feet beyond their prey, then braked and faced about. At Brend's order the dazzling white of

an electron barrage sprang into being from the muzzles of the electron-bars. Slowly and in unison, the eight closed in.

And the globe, on the alert now, retreated before them.

Steadily the gap between men and ship narrowed. In the gigantic cup

of the barrage the globe spun and darted. The electronic field hemmed it in, hurled it back in shorter and shorter rushes, pinned it at last against the *Argonaut's* hull.

"Cargo!" shouted Brend.

Skillfully trained men pushed their captive into the cargo port, where others took over, and soon the globe was safely behind the tight door of Hold B, in that part of the ship evacuated of air for the handling of specimens taken in space.

"Congratulations, captain," remarked the voice that had spoken before. "That looked for a while like a tough assignment."

BREND TURNED from Hold B's observation window to see John Storm at his elbow. "It was just a bit too easy," he answered curtly.

"Come now, you don't think it played into your hands deliberately? You don't think this is your super-human entity at last?"

"We don't know a thing about it," replied Brend.

"Hope dies hard, doesn't it?" countered Storm. "Even in men like you, who should be first to realize that the old hopes are doomed. Ever since man first dreamed of reaching other worlds, it was to hope of finding a wisdom greater than his own and willing to spare him the pain of learning by bitter experience. But it wasn't in the cards. Venus was found peopled by cretins. Mars is an empty dust bowl, its canals mere tide rips caused by vanished moons before its crust cooled. Elsewhere life is common enough, but man still has almost a monopoly on intelligence. I'm afraid your super-intellect just doesn't exist."

Brend was staring into Hold B. The thing rested, a bubble of unknown substance, pulsing with inscrutable life, in midspace. He

switched off the fluorescents; in the dark the globe shone faintly.

"I've taken over two hundred specimens," he said slowly, "and never felt as I do about this one. I could almost believe the thing is laughing at us, that it could escape through the hull if it liked, that it stays at will—and at our expense."

Storm chuckled. "Who says spacemen are unimaginative? But if you put this thing above nineteen on the Baum scale, you're flattering it. Of course, its control of the cathode circuit was remarkable, but so was the electric eel's method of stunning its prey, old a million years before Volta built the galvanic pile. This creature lives in space, in an environment of cosmic rays, free electrons, and the like. Why shouldn't it have a limited control of subatomic forces? Such control needn't argue intelligence any more than does the eel's generation of electricity."

Brend shrugged, led the way through the air lock. In the ship proper he doffed his helmet, revealing a shock of red hair, an old-young face tanned by watches behind unscreened observation ports and engraved by wind and weather of more than one planet.

"Would you be willing to turn it loose?" he asked Storm abruptly.

The other laid down his helmet with exaggerated care. "Do you feel well, captain?"

"I mean it," said Brend. "I hired out to take specimens for you, but I'd feel better if that thing weren't aboard."

Storm's mocking good nature suddenly vanished. A man of about Brend's age, sandy-haired and blue-eyed, the set of his jaw now became challenging.

"The specimen stays," he said flatly.

Brend shrugged. "If you say so. I'll be on the bridge, if you should change your mind. We're laying by a couple of hours for Ferguson to make some observations."

Storm's answering grunt was more eloquent than speech.

NO DREADNOUGHT commander could have found fault with the *Argonaut's* bridge deck. The ship had been Brend's for five years, and unconsciously he straightened a little as he entered the control compartment, inhabited at that moment by Calloway, the second officer, and the ship's cat, Comet, a plain Earth feline of doubtful ancestry.

"Ferguson says he'll be a couple of hours still," reported Calloway. "Never took him that long before."

"Doesn't matter," said Brend. "We'll check our bearings meanwhile. What's our drift?"

Calloway gave it and Brend swung the transit in its gymbals for a sight on Jupiter. The cat scrubbed affectionately against his legs as he read the transit settings to Calloway, who punched a computing tape, ran it through the calculator, and announced the result.

Brend swung around for a check reading on the Sun. "Forty, sixteen minutes, ten seconds. Azimuth six point two—"

Calloway looked up in astonishment as Brend stopped. The transit dipped at an absurd angle. Brend was staring foolishly at his wrists. His eyes came up, met Calloway's in blank amazement.

The cat miaowed piteously of a sudden. Brend backed away from it, looked at Calloway like a man about to burst, opened his mouth twice without making a sound.

"Gord alive! What the devil does

this mean, sor?" he asked the astonished junior officer.

AT THE MOMENT Brend stepped upon the bridge, deck engineer Hobbs was cursing in fluent engine-room English, the stupidity of oilers in general and Hoskins in particular.

"Number 3 runnin' dry, blast you, and the cap'n may be wantin' juice any minute. Look at them bearin's. 'Ot as hell and twice as shameful!"

Obediently, Hoskins went to work, thrusting himself and a long-snouted oil can halfway into the whining intricacies of the machine. Hobbs turned to his switchboard. For minutes the snarl and snap of oscillating inductors, the hum of air circulators and alternators, were the only sounds in the engine room.

And then it happened.

Hoskins straightened like a spring let go, leaped wildly back from that maze of flashing levers. There was a *thwack* of metal as the oil can was knocked from his hand, to roll into the drip pan and be hammered flat by the reciprocating field yoke, while the oiler stared dumbly.

"Seein' snakes, 'Oskins? Martian vipers, maybe?" suggested Hobbs caustically. "All thumbs you are. Finish up now, while I phone the bridge ready-all."

Grumbling, he closed the phone cubby door against the noises of the engine room. He could have reported by bridge signal, but when time permitted, took delight in phoning the "cap'n" personally. So Hobbs failed to notice that Hoskins did not finish oiling, but stood as though dazed. The fact escaped Hobbs even when he stepped out of the cubby, a sorely preoccupied man.

"You know wot?" he asked. "I says to the cap'n will he have a thousand kilos on the stern plates,

like usual, and 'e says, 'I dunno.' And I says wot the hell, only in other words, and 'e says, how should 'e know? I says, 'Sorry, cap'n, I didn't get that.' 'E comes back, 'I don't either, and I ain't the cap'n.' And 'e hung up! Wot I want to know, if 'e ain't Cap'n Brend—and I know the cap'n's voice, mind you—then who the devil is Cap'n Brend?"

The oiler turned a haggard face. "I am," he answered.

THIRTY MINUTES later the men of the *Argonaut* assembled in the mess room, most of them curiously diffident and unwilling to meet one another's eyes. Brend found no need to ask for silence. It was already complete.

"Men," he began, "something almighty queer is going on aboard this ship. I've had the devil of a time getting you all together—and some of you know why."

"Wot he means," interrupted the man who seemed to be Brend, "is that I ain't the captain and he ain't me. Each of us is the other fellow."

Brend nodded, curiously shy in his enforced role of oiler. There was a general clearing of throats. Carson stepped forward.

"Yes, Carson?" urged Brend.

The man licked his lips. "I . . . I'm not Carson, cap'n. Thought you'd like to know. I'm Upton."

A voice spoke from the rear. "I'm Carson."

The silence deepened.

"What's this?" snapped Storm. "What are you trying to put over, Brend?"

"I'd be glad if you could tell us," Brend retorted. "The fact is something is playing hell with us psychologically. We ought to find out how far it's gone—take a sort of 'Who's

Who.' I'll call the roll—" The stolid features of Hoskins suddenly relaxed. It was the squeaky voice of Ferguson, the astrogator, that finished: "—if you'll let me have my notebook, Hoskins."

"You still Brend?" First Officer Roth inquired bluntly.

"Certainly," replied "Ferguson."

"Look at your sleeves."

Brend stared at the star-and-sex-tant insignia. "Merciful heavens! Now I'm Ferguson. I mean, I'm Brend, but—"

He relaxed into unprintable invective. Storm got up and left the room.

"Roll call is in order," snapped the pseudo-Brend suddenly. "Answer to your actual identity, regardless of anything else."

He paused to search his pockets.

"Notebook's on my . . . on your left hip," supplied the real Brend. "You aren't Hoskins any longer?"

"I'm Calloway, of course," was the reply. "No! Great galaxies, now I've switched!"

"Call the roll," barked Roth.

"Very well. Captain Brend?"

"Here," squeaked Ferguson's voice.

"Bates?"

"Here," responded Kemp, an oiler.

"Hobbs?"

"'Ere," answered Bates. "God 'elp me."

"Upton?"

"Present," replied Bates again.

"You just answered as Hobbs."

"Can't help it," the man returned. "I'm Upton."

Calloway closed the notebook. "We may as well give *that* up," he said bitterly. "This is a case for Mr. Storm."

"Storm's gone," volunteered a voice.

Brend swore whole-heartedly,

proving beyond all doubt that he was Brend, although the oaths came strangely in Ferguson's high-pitched voice.

"Hell's bells," said somebody. "Look at Jimson!"

All eyes turned to the big Negro cook. His were closed, and he was rocking back and forth where he sat, fists clenched, lips drawn back to reveal white teeth in an evil snarl.

Brend leaped up, locked an arm under the Negro's chin from behind. "Four of you grab his arms and legs. Never seen space fever before?"

THEY WERE scarcely in time. At their touch, Jimson's eyes opened. The great body gathered itself, lunged forward despite Brend's throttling grip. Again and again the men holding the Negro's legs were kicked away. His bloodshot eyes were open and staring. It was five minutes before his eyes closed and the convulsions ceased.

"He won't have them again," said Brend, "but he's dangerous. We'll have to lock him up. Wonder if he's really Jimson?"

"He suttinly ain't, suh!" indignantly offered the voice of Hoskins in the accents of Jimson.

Nobody answered. Jimson, the cook, was least of all likely to contract the homicidal madness that came from staring into space.

"Where is Storm?" asked Calloway-Brend. "He might help."

The Negro's eyes opened again, no sanity in them. He looked around the tense circle of faces and his lips lifted in the characteristic leer of the spacemad.

"I'm Ferguson," he said suddenly. "Dale Ferguson, astrogator. Hell is where the Sun is. Nobody knows I'm dead. But I'm going to kill them. Kill them all. And I won't tell!"

He grinned wolfishly, suddenly closed his eyes again.

"Sure, Dale, you'll kill them," said Brend soothingly, his glance commanding silence. "But how? How can you kill them? You aren't very big. But, of course, you're astrogator."

"Ferguson, astrogator," mumbled the Negro. "It was easy. All planned beforehand. They'll all be as dead as I am—but I'm safe. I can't die."

"Of course not," soothed Brend. "Tell us what you planned."

There was utter silence as the maniac's eyes shot open and stared suspiciously around the mute circle of men. Ferguson spacemad! The man whose calculations were responsible, more than any other's, for the safety of the ship! He might have been mad for days, cunningly plotting, with an insane conviction of his own immortality, the death of them all.

"Meteor!" whispered the Negro's lips. "Ninety-four hours away when I spotted it. Big enough to smash them dead. I killed them."

"When did it happen?" Brend murmured.

"I don't remember—only an hour now. It's beautiful, that meteor. Beautiful as death. The ship's drifting across its course." The madman's voice rose to a scream. "I'll kill anybody who says it isn't so."

Brend stood up. "That's enough. Lock him up—we'll treat him later. Calloway, Roth—to the bridge deck with me. The rest of you get to your flight stations."

CALLOWAY, still as Brend, and Roth in the person of Marston, an oiler, accompanied Brend to the observation bridge. It took them twenty minutes to compute the course of the barely discernible dot

approaching from sunward. An astrogator could have done it in ten.

"He wasn't lying," said Brend, gently kicking aside the cat, annoyingly intent upon affectionate gestures. "They rarely do at that stage. We'll get under way at once."

He punched the engine-room telegraph, was relieved to get back the "ready" signal. At his feet, Comet set up a dismal caterwauling. He reached for the "power-forward" button.

Sudden dizziness assailed him, so that he almost fell against the signal panel—but it wasn't the signal panel. He was leaning heavily against the brass railing before the engine-room switchboard. From their stations before the inductance switches, Hobbs and Carson stared at him curiously. He was sure they weren't Hobbs and Carson. Looking down at his own sleeves, he saw the twin-comet insignia of a second officer. He was, for the moment, Calloway. But Calloway had probably last been Hoskins. And Hoskins must now be—

Brend swore. A grin flickered over the pseudo-Hobbs' face. "Thanks, captain. I'm Roth."

"You're dead!" screamed the third man suddenly. "You've got to understand you're dead, all of you—except me."

His lips writhed, and as Roth tried to approach him from behind he whirled, caught up and brandished a long wrench.

"You just don't want to die! There'll be a meteor and fiery particles when it hits—but first I must see that you don't get away."

He stared about wildly, then with one swift movement, thrust the wrench through the ventilating cage of a small high-tension alternator. Brend cried out hoarsely. There was a tremendous crack, a flash that

lit up the engine room like a flood lamp for an instant, and "Carson" sank to the floor.

Brend at once cut out the turbine drive to the alternator, and both he and Roth turned to the stricken man. There was a faint pulse, but his face was bluish.

"Adrenalin!" ordered Brend.

Roth found the drug in the engine-room medicine chest and Brend injected it. After a minute, "Carson" opened his eyes.

"Mr. Calloway! What's up with me? I feel like I crossed a live line, sure," he said.

"You did. Who are you?"

"Hobbs, o' course. I 'ope nothing's damaged—"

He fell silent at the glance that passed between the others.

"Jimson's locked up—but Ferguson is somebody else by now," snapped Brend. "He may keep changing. Pass orders that the men are to go about only in pairs—and to watch one another. May as well let Jimson go."

Roth departed on his errand. Brend helped Hobbs to his feet, pointed to the damaged alternator.

"Ferguson's work. Can we move without it?"

"No, *sir!*" said Hobbs vehemently. "That's the exciter for the inductor fields. But maybe I can fix it."

"Get busy. You have about thirty minutes."

"THEY'RE watching each other," reported Roth, as Brend re-entered the control compartment. "Ferguson turned up as Kemp for a minute and tried to kill Hoskins, but when they pulled him off he wasn't Ferguson any more. There's no telling, of course, who he'll be next. Maybe we ought to give everybody a shot of metrazol."

"And have all hands in convul-



sions? No, we can't treat Ferguson until he stays Ferguson. Meanwhile, nobody must be allowed to stray off by himself—has Storm turned up?"

"I've put four men to searching for him."

"Good. Let's check that meteor again."

As Roth pushed open the door of the observation compartment, a furry streak launched itself from the top of the calculator, to land clawing on his shoulder. He cursed with pain and indignantly pulled Comet off, as the cat's claws found flesh. It scampered in circles for a moment, then rubbed heavily against Brend's legs, whining urgently.

Carefully the two men rechecked the course of the meteor, Brend at the telescope and Roth at the calculator. The first officer suddenly swore with vexation. Brend looked up to see Comet, again on top of the machine, making passes with one paw at Roth's head.

"She's driving me nutty," Roth groaned. "Can't we lock her up?"

"Have to catch her first," remarked Brend, for the cat had jumped to the floor and backed into a far corner.

"We've found Storm, captain," reported Bates, entering with Jimson. Between them they supported the figure of Storm.

"If he is Storm," added Brend. "Well, who are you?"

The man stared at him calmly, but made no reply.

"That's how he's been," said Bates. "Won't say a word. Can't walk, either—if we were in port I'd say he was drunk. We found him asleep on top of the main condenser. D'you think he's—"

"I don't know," said Brend heavily. "The two of you stay with him. If he begins to act like Ferguson, you know what to do." He stooped

suddenly, snatched up Comet, who had been rubbing stiff-legged against his ankles. "Somebody lock her up. She's a damned nuisance."

Jimson took the wriggling, squalling cat, and with Bates and the pseudo-Storm left the compartment.

"Looks bad," admitted Brend, when he and Roth had finished their computations. "Fourteen minutes to go—for Heaven's sake, Roth, don't take it like that!"

The pseudo-Hobbs had leaped from his chair before the calculator, his lips working. Brend backed against the wall, groped for the small brass-bound telescope affixed there.

"And 'ow should I take it, sor?" rasped the other. "How's a man to do 'is work when he's beside 'imself 'alf the time?"

Brend almost grinned with relief. "You're yourself now, Hobbs. I hope you're done with those repairs."

"Done!" snorted Hobbs. "Not by 'alf we ain't, wot with bobbin' around like we all are. Now I've got to go back. Wish I never came up 'ere in the first place. It's plain 'ell, sor."

"Aye," agreed Brend. "And if that exciter isn't running in thirteen minutes, it'll be worse—although I don't see how it could be. Send Roth back here if you find him."

Hobbs vanished, grumbling. Shortly Carson appeared. "I'm Roth, captain. I've seen that exciter—no chance of patching it up in time. Makes you wish for a couple of the old rocket tubes."

"How are the men taking it?"

"Well, Ferguson has them in jitters, of course. Next to him, the constant shifting of identities seems to bother them more than the meteor. Psychologically, I guess, it strikes nearer—"

A protracted and ghastly screech

cut him off. Brend burst into the control compartment with Roth at his heels, to face Jimson, who held Comet by the scruff of the neck with one hand and by the two hind legs with the other. A second demoniacal howl came from the cat's throat.

"What is this?" Brend roared at Bates, who sat with the pseudo-Storm on the floor.

"Dunno, cap'n. Jimson—he was Kemp then—went off to lock Comet up. Then he come back with her—"

"Nobody wants to die," complained the big Negro. "They won't let me kill them. Except the cat. She can't stop me."

His huge fingers clamped around the little beast's throat, heedless of her clawing and her piteous, throttled cries.

"I won't stand for that," muttered Roth, starting forward. Brend clutched his arm. Marston, in the doorway behind the Negro, suddenly caught the big man's arms from behind. The cat at once leaped to the floor and scuttled for safety, while all three men secured the viciously struggling pseudo-Jimson.

"Just as well this can't last much longer," muttered Roth, with a glance toward the glassite-enclosed observation turret. The meteor could now be plainly seen with the naked eye, apparently motionless, despite its terrific head-on speed. "Eight minutes more—"

COMET was brushing Brend's trouser cuffs vigorously, as though grateful for even that small respite, but when Brend looked down at her she backed away with mincing, high-lifted steps. Then, when sure of his attention, she suddenly leaped full upon the figure of the pseudo-Storm.

Storm instantly shrank back, his lips writhing back as Jimson's had a moment before, breath whistling between his teeth. Bates clutched him on one side, Brend at the other.

And the cat, leaping back, regarded all three with a quizzically urgent expression.

"Funny," said Brend. "He looked like Ferguson for a second." He spoke directly to Storm. "Who are you—not that it's going to matter, ten minutes from now, whether you care to say or not."

The man made no reply, but deliberately yawned, revealing a mouthful of excellent teeth.

"That's all he's done since we found him," supplied Bates. "Just yawn and want to lie down—on his belly if we'd let him. Cat's got his tongue all right—"

"That's it!" whispered Brend.

"What is?" asked Roth.

For answer Brend seized the cat, lifted her to the top of the calculator.

"Are you Storm?"

Comet nodded her head violently. Bates and Roth looked on dumfounded.

"Don't you see?" asked Brend. "We were all interchanged with one another, but Storm was put into the cat's body. And the cat in Storm's body—"

Comet nodded in a paroxysm of agreement.

"You found Storm—or what looked like Storm," Brend went on, "sleeping on top of the condenser. It's warm there, and Comet's favorite spot. She was too puzzled by the bigness of her new body to control it properly, so she went philosophical and tried to sleep it off. Storm wasn't so lucky. He couldn't tell anybody he was Storm, and we

were too confused ourselves to catch on. When I told Jimson to lock up what I thought was the cat, he picked that moment to turn into Ferguson. No wonder Storm howled. He *knew* he was in a bad spot."

The cat waved a paw and looked appealingly at Brend. A moment later it repeated the motion. With a gasp of comprehension, Brend offered it a pencil. The animal cocked its head at it, then reared up on its hind legs and stabbed the air frantically with both paws before it was obliged to come down on all fours. Seeing Brend still puzzled, it jumped to the floor and miaowed urgently before a closet under the chart table.

"The typewriter!" muttered Brend. Storm had borrowed it once when his own was out of order, and knew where it was kept. Brend put the cat and the machine upon the chart table, and inserted a sheet of paper.

Standing on three legs, the cat clumsily tapped out, with an occasional wrong letter: "i am storm. get all hands here quick."

Brend stared questioningly, whereupon, the animal added: "rush—emergency."

"Maybe we're all crazy," mut-

tered Brend, "but go ahead and do it, Roth."

Storm was typing again. "hurry. entity in hold deliberately responsible for personality changes. inform all hands—rush."

The cat paused, looked at Brend urgently.

Two by two, the men entered the control compartment, crowding the place from wall to wall.

"A man can't do no work aboard this ship," muttered Hobbs darkly. "If ye'd left me alone another forty minutes, cap'n, I'd have had that there exciter hummin'—"

"We've only got about four," Brend interrupted. "Men, as crazy as it sounds, Mr. Storm was switched with Comet, here, while what looks like Mr. Storm is simply the cat. That's a fact. Storm has just managed to tell us that the thing in Hold B is back of the mix-up of identities—"

"And a big help you were," growled Storm, shaking Bates' hand from his shoulder. "This farce might have ended an hour ago if somebody had listened to me."

He glowered about in his proper person, while Comet jumped off the table and disappeared under a chart shelf.

"You should all be yourselves

now," Storm said. "That was the understanding—look out!"

THERE WAS sudden commotion in the huddled group of men; it subsided with two husky oilers hanging to the arms of Ferguson, evidently himself again and as mad as ever.

"You mean that's all over?" asked Brend—as Brend.

"Quite," replied Storm. "It agreed to consider the incident closed if I could manage, while apparently the cat, to let you know my real identity and tell you that it was back of the whole thing."

"And who is 'it'?"

"The thing in Hold B," snapped Storm tartly. "Actually it's a plural entity, the superhuman intellect you've always believed in, and it isn't in Hold B at all. The globe we see is only a three-dimensional cross section of its four-dimensional body, which isn't actually material. It's probably gone from Hold B by now, incidentally. As you thought, Brend, it allowed us to take it."

"How do you know all this?" asked Brend.

"I don't know. I remember walking out of the mess room, although I didn't *want* to leave. Then there's a blank, and later I came to as the cat. I knew things I couldn't remember learning. It—or they—were piqued by our treatment of it, and by my remarks especially. That was why it picked me for the goat, I suppose.

"It lives outside our space-time frame. The globe isn't native to our universe at all, but was simply exploring when we ran across it. Something about infinite or absolute time occurred to me, the ultimate of an infinite series in which it dwells, whereas we exist consciously in only one time extension which appears to us as primary time. Able to move

at will along the infinite serialism of time, it was able to shift our identities from outside the time-sequence normal to us among the space-time co-ordinates which are our bodies. I don't know why it did so, unless to teach us a lesson. I don't think it intended any harm—"

"Then it slipped up," said Brend grimly. "Look!"

All eyes turned to the observation window. The meteor, an irregular grayish mass, loomed balefully close. In utter silence they watched it swell in apparent size, with the calm of men who had faced death in thought long before and were prepared for the reality.

"Now!" shrieked Ferguson, grinning horribly. "All going to hell—except me. Don't you wish you were dead, too?"

"Wish he'd shut up," muttered Roth. "We could have let the men draw straws for the nine spacesuits on board—personally I'll take mine quick."

Brend made no answer. A mist was forming over his eyes. He blinked and the mist remained. Between ship and meteor it thickened, gleamed with brightening phosphorescence. He bit his lips, glanced at Roth, intently staring through the port. The mist limned Roth also, a tangible luminous fog here in the control compartment.

TANGIBLE! Something more than mist. Not something that might be seen or heard. Only the phosphorescent fog was visible. But Brend felt a presence, felt it as simply and irrevocably as pain is felt. It was something that required no words.

An ego, of childlike yet gigantic intellect—childlike because innocent of evil, gigantic in scope.

A brooding and immutable peace. "Our brothers!" Space rang with

the words—or was it the thought of these words?

Brend never knew. He heard them plainly, but that might have been belief following upon perception. He stared into the effulgence that dazzlingly filled the control turret, and saw only light. But he felt—entity.

"Brothers, one of you has said that we were piqued by your behavior, but if he meant angered, he spoke inaccurately. You thrust yourself upon us, and in our curiosity we altered your conditions of existence, watched you struggle, and thwarted your efforts to learn what your further reactions might be. To one of you was given a problem, which he solved, bringing the test to an end. We had no intent to harm you, and it is our hope that you will feel no malice for what we have done.

"Now we see you faced with what you believe to be extinction, ignorant yet possessed of a courage our wisdom could not surpass. Ignorant, for unconsciously your identities extend throughout the infinite serialism of time even as ours, else we could not have disassociated those identities from the bodies to which they had become accustomed.

"What you call death is therefore impossible. Nevertheless, it may be your race has need of such courage as yours, and you shall return to tell of us. Such powers as propel your ship are warps in the fabric of space, which we are able to distend or collapse at will. We shall remove what threatens you. Perhaps we shall meet again. Life to you, brothers!"

With the last word, the mist vanished. The meteor, immense, inescapable, all but filled the port. Brend judged it to be no more than

a mile away. As meteoric speeds go, a matter of a second or two—

Abruptly a fiery coruscation of sparks broke out upon it, outlined it for an instant in cold flame.

The same instant it was gone. Within the ship, silence held. Silence while long seconds ticked by, while men stared through the port and found it incredible that they were still alive.

Brend looked around and surprised a number of sheepish grins.

"Show's over," he said briskly. "We'll give Ferguson the metrazol treatment and have him around to normal in forty hours or so. Hobbs, you can finish your repairs now. We owe you a vote of thanks, Storm. I wonder if it would have saved us if you'd failed."

"I don't know," answered Storm.

"But you did know about the meteor all along, or you wouldn't have been in such a desperate rush."

"Meteor, hell," snarled Storm. "I was sweating blood—and not because of any damned meteor. The next time you take a cat aboard, you'd better investigate her character and condition."

"There's nothing wrong with Comet," said Roth stanchly.

"Might not have been," Storm growled, "if we hadn't stopped at the Martian fuel depot, where they keep a cat of their own—the other kind of cat. I tell you there wasn't a minute to lose—and I hope I never go through anything like that again as long as I live."

Brend grinned, snatched up a flashlight and peered under the chart shelf. When he stood up to face Storm, the latter's features were a deep red.

"Let's pass out quietly, men," said Brend softly. "Comet has become a mother!"