

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

No. 1
VOLUME I

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3
COMPLETE
ACTION
NOVELS



★ THE SLAVE by C. M. KORNBLUTH ★

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. I No. I

1958

3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers !

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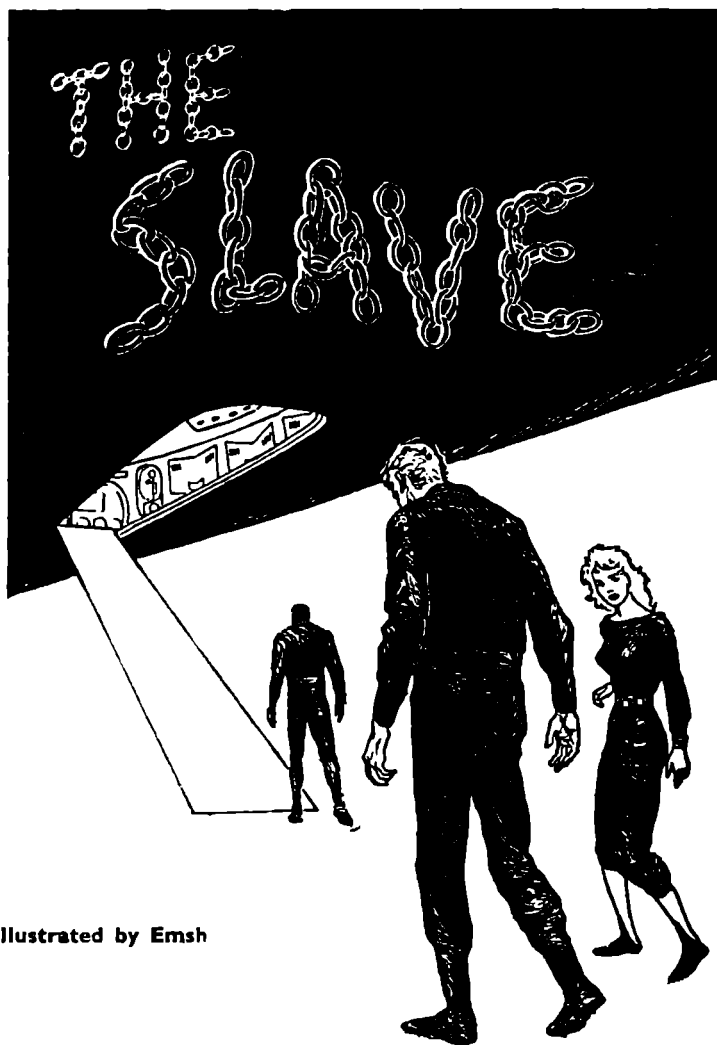
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Illustrated by Emsch

C. M. Kornbluth is one of those rare writers whose straight science fiction has become highly popular among a wide audience of people who do not read science fiction regularly. His novels, like Takeoff and The Syndic, have won universal critical acclaim ; his shorter stories are invariably anthologised, not once but over and over again. The Slave we think, in every way maintains the high level of his usual work.

THE SLAVE

by C. M. Kornbluth

*To become a man again, he had to be two men,
fighting an enemy who had conquered billions?*

Chapter 1

The drunken bum known as Chuck wandered through the revelry of the New Year's Eve crowd. Times Square was jammed with people ; midnight and a whole new millennium were approaching. Horns tooted, impromptu snake-dances formed and dissolved, bottles were happily passed from hand to hand ; it was minutes to A.D. 2,000. One of those bottles passed to Chuck and passed no further. He scowled at a merry-maker who reached for it after he took his swig, and jammed it into a pocket. He had what he came for ; he began to fight his way out of the crowd, westward to the jungle of Riveredge.

The crowd thinned out at Ninth Avenue, and by Tenth Avenue he was almost alone, lurching through the tangle of transport machinery that fed Manhattan its daily billion tons

of food, freight, clothes, toys. Floodlights glared day and night over Riveredge, but there was darkness there too, in patches under a 96-inch oil main or in the angle between a warehouse wall and its inbound roofed freightway. From these patches men looked out at him with sudden suspicion and then dull lack of care. One or two called at him aimlessly, guessing that he had a bottle on him. Once a woman yelled her hoarse invitation at him from the darkness, but he stumbled on. Ten to one the invitation was to a lead pipe behind the ear.

Now and then, losing his bearings, he stopped and turned his head peeringly before stumbling on. He never got lost in Riveredge, which was more than most transport engineers, guided by blueprints, could say. T.G. was *that* way.

He crashed at last into his own shared patch of darkness : the hollow on one side of a titantic I-beam. It supported a freightway over which the heaviest castings and forgings for the city rumbled night and day. A jagged sheet of corrugated metal leaned against the hollow, enclosing it as if by accident.

"Hello, Chuck," T.G. croaked at him from the darkness as he slid under the jagged sheet and collapsed on a pallet of nylon rags.

"Yeh," he grunted.

"Happy New Year," T.G. said. "I heard it over here. It was louder than the freightway. You scored."

"Good guess," Chuck said sceptically, and passed him the bottle. There was a long gurgle in the dark. T.G. said at last : "Good stuff." The gurgle again. Chuck reached for the bottle and took a long drink. It was good stuff. Old Huntsman. He used to drink it with—

T.G. said suddenly, pretending innocent curiosity : "Jocko who ?"

Chuck lurched to his feet and yelled : "God damn you, I told you not to do that ! If you want any more of my liquor keep the hell out of my head—and I *still* think you're a phony !"

T.G. was abject. "Don't take it that way, Chuck," he whined. "I get a belt of good stuff in me and I want to give the talent a little workout, that's all. You know I would not do anything bad to you."

"You'd better not . . . Here's the bottle."

It passed back and forth. T.G. said at last : "You've got it too."

"You're crazy."

I would be if it wasn't for the liquor . . . but you've got it too.

"Oh, shut up and drink."

Innocently : "I didn't say anything, Chuck."

Chuck glared in the darkness. It was true ; he hadn't. His imagination was hounding him. His imagination or something else he didn't want to think about.

The sheet of corrugated metal was suddenly wrenched aside and blue-white light stabbed into their eyes. Chuck and the old man cowered instinctively back into the hollow of the I-beam, peering into the light and seeing nothing but dazzle.

"God, look at them !" a voice jeered from the other side of the light. "Like turning over a wet rock."

"What the hell's going on?" Chuck asked hoarsely. "Since when did you clowns begin to pull bags?"

T.G. said : "They aren't the clowns, Chuck. They want you—I can't see why."

The voice said : "Yeah ? And just who are you, grampa?"

T.G. stood up straight, his eyes watering in the glare. "The Great Hazleton," he said, with some of the old ring in his voice "At your service. Don't tell me who you are, sir. The Great Hazleton knows. I see a man of authority, a man who works in a large white building—"

"Knock it off, T.G.," Chuck said.

"You're Charles Barker," the voice said. "Come along quietly."

Chuck took a long pull at the bottle and passed it to T.G. "Take it easy," he said. "I'll be back sometime."

"No," T.G. quavered. "I see danger. I see terrible danger."

The man behind the dazzling light took his arm and yanked him out of the shelter of the I-beam.

"Cut out the mauling," Chuck said flatly.

"Shut up, Barker," the man said with disgust. "*You* have no beefs coming."

So he knew where the man had come from and could guess where the man was taking him.

At 1:58 a.m. of the third millennium Chuck was slouching in a waiting room on the 89th floor of the New Federal

Building. The man who had pulled him out of Riveredge was sitting there too, silent and aloof.

Chuck had been there before. He cringed at the thought. He had been there before, and not to sit and wait. Special Agent Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence had been ushered right in, with the sweetest smile a receptionist could give him . . .

A door opened and a spare, well-remembered figure stood there. "Come in, Barker," the Chief said.

He stood up and went in, his eyes on the grey carpeting. The office hadn't changed in three years; neither had the Chief. But now Chuck waited until he was asked before sitting down.

"We had some trouble finding you," the Chief said absently. "Not much, but some. First we ran some ads addressed to you in the open Service code. Don't you read the papers any more?"

"No," Chuck said.

"You look pretty well shot. Do you think you can still work?"

The ex-agent looked at him piteously.

"Answer me."

"Don't play with me," Chuck said, his eyes on the carpet. "You never reinstate."

"Barker," the Chief said, "I happen to have an especially filthy assignment to deal out. In my time, I've sent men into an alley at midnight after a mad-dog killer with a full clip. This one is so much worse and the chances of getting a sliver of useable information in return for an agent's life are so slim that I couldn't bring myself to ask for volunteers for the roster.

"Do you think you can still work?"

"Why me?" the ex-agent demanded sullenly.

"That's a good question. There are others. I thought of you because of the defence you put up at your departmental trial. Officially, you turned and ran, leaving Jocko McAllester to be cut down by the gun-runners. Your story was that somehow you knew it was an ambush and when that dawned on you, you ran to cover the flank. The board didn't buy it and neither do I—not all the way. You let a hunch override standard doctrine and you were wrong and it looked like cowardice under fire. We can't have that; you had to go. But you've had other hunches that worked out better.

The Bruni case. Locating the photostats we needed for the Wayne County civil rights indictment. Digging up that louse Sherrard's wife in Birmingham. Unless it's been a string of lucky flukes you have a certain talent I need right now. If you have that talent, you may come out alive. And cleared."

Barker leaned forward and said savagely: "That's good enough for me. Fill me in."

Chapter II

The woman was tall, quietly dressed and a young forty-odd. Her eyes were serene and guileless as she said: "You must be curious as to how I know about your case. It's quite simple—and unethical. We have a tipster in the clinic you visited. May I sit down?"

Dr. Oliver started and waved her to the dun-coloured chair. A reaction was setting in. It was a racket—a cold-blooded racket preying on weak-minded victims silly with terror. "What's your proposition?" he asked impatient to get it over with. "How much do I pay?"

"Nothing," the woman said calmly. "We usually pay poorer patients a little something to make up for the time they lose from work, but I presume you have a nest-egg. All this will cost you is a pledge of secrecy—and a little time."

"Very well," said Oliver stiffly. He had been hooked often enough by salesmen on no-money-down, free-trial-for-thirty-days, demonstration-for-consumer-reaction-only deals. He was on his guard.

"I find it's best to begin at the beginning," the woman said. "I'm an investment counsellor. For the past five years I've also been a field representative for something called the Moorhead Foundation. The Moorhead Foundation was organized in 1915 by Oscar Moorhead, the patent-medicine millionaire. He died very deeply embittered by the attacks of the muck-rakers; they called him a baby-poisoner and a number of other things. He always claimed that his preparations did just as much good as a visit to an average doctor of the period. Considering the state of medical education and licensing, maybe he was right.

"His will provided for a secret search for the cure of cancer. He must have got a lot of consolation daydreaming about it. One day the Foundation would announce to a startled world

that it had cracked the problem and that old Oscar Moorhead was a servant of humanity and not a baby-poisoner after all.

"Maybe secrecy is good for research. I'm told that we know a number of things about neoplasms that the pathologists haven't hit on yet, including how to cure most types by radiation. My job, besides clipping coupons and reinvesting funds for the Foundation, is to find and send on certain specified types of cancer patients. The latest is what they call a Rotino 707-G. You. The technical people will cure you without surgery in return for a buttoned lip and the chance to study you for about a week. Is it a deal?"

Hope and anguish struggled in Dr. Oliver. *Could* anybody invent such a story? *Was* he saved from the horror of the knife?

"Of course," he said, his guts contracting, "I'll be expected to pay a share of the expenses, won't I? In common fairness?"

The woman smiled. "You think it's a racket, don't you? Well it isn't. You don't pay a cent. Come with your pockets empty and leave your cheque book at home if you like. The Foundation gives you free room and board. I personally don't know the ins and outs of the Foundation, but I have professional standing of my own and I assure you I'm not acting as a transmission belt to a criminal gang. I've *seen* the patients, Dr. Oliver. I send them on sick and I see them a week or so later well. It's like a miracle."

Dr. Oliver went distractedly to his telephone stand, picked up the red book and leafed through it.

"Roosevelt 4-19803," the woman said with amusement in her voice.

Doggedly he continued to turn the "W" pages. He found her. "Mgrrt WINSTON invstmnt cnslr RO4-19803." He punched the number.

"Winston investments," came the answer.

"Is Miss Winston there?" he asked.

"No, sir. She should be back by three if you wish to call again. May I take a message?"

"No message. But—would you describe Miss Winston for me?"

The voice giggled. "Why not? She's about five-eight, weighs about 135, brown hair and eyes and when last seen

was wearing a tailored navy culotte suit with white cuffs and collar. What're you up to, mister?"

"Not a thing," he said. "Thanks." He hung up.

"Look," the woman said. She was emptying her wallet. "Membership card in the Investment Counsellors' Guild. U.M.T honorable discharge, even if it is a reduced photostat. City license to do business. Airline credit card. Residential rental permit. City motor vehicle parking permit. Blood-donor card "

He turned them over in his hands. The plastic-laminated things were unanswerable, and he gave himself up to relief and exultation. "I'm in, Miss Winston," he said fervently. "You should have seen the fellow they showed me after an operation like mine." He shuddered as he remembered Jimmy and his "splendid adjustment."

"I don't have to," the woman said, putting her wallet away. "I saw my mother die. From one of the types of cancer they haven't licked yet. I get the usual commission on funds I handle for them, but I have a little personal interest in promoting the research end . . ."

"Oh. I see."

Suddenly she was brisk. "Now, Dr. Oliver, you've got to write whatever letters are necessary to explain that you're taking a little unplanned trip to think things out, or whatever you care to say. And pack enough things for a week. You can be on the jet in an hour if you're a quick packer and a quick letter-writer."

"Jet to where?" he asked, without thinking.

She smiled and shook her head.

Dr. Oliver shrugged and went to his typewriter. This was one gift horse he would not look in the mouth. Not after Jimmy.

Two hours later the fat sophomore Gillespie arrived full of lies and explanations with his overdue theme on the Elizabethan dramatists, which was full of borrowings and evasions. On Dr. Oliver's door was pinned a small note in the doctor's handwriting: *Dr. Oliver will be away for several days for reasons of health.*

Gillespie scratched his head and shrugged. It was all right with him; Dr. Oliver was practically impossible to get along with, in spite of his vague reputation for brilliance. A schizoid, his girl called him. She majored in Psych.

Chapter III

The Moorhead Foundation proved to be in Mexico, in a remote valley of the state of Sonora. A jetliner took Dr. Oliver and Miss Winston most of the way very fast. Buses and finally an obsolete gasoline-powered truck driven by a Mexican took them the rest of the way very slowly. The buildings were a remodelled *rancheria* enclosed by a low, thick adobe wall.

Dr. Oliver, at the door of his comfortable bedroom, said : "Look, will I be treated immediately?" He seemed to have been asking that question for two days, but never to have got a plain yes or no answer.

"It all depends," Miss Winston said. "Your type of growth is definitely curable and they'll definitely cure it. But there may be a slight holdup while they're studying it. That's your part of the bargain, after all. Now I'll be on my way. I expect you're sleepy, and the lab people will take over from here. It's been a great pleasure."

They shook hands and Dr. Oliver had trouble suppressing a yawn. He was very sleepy, but he tried to tell Miss Winston how grateful he was. She smiled deprecatingly, almost cynically, and said : "We're using you too, remember? Well, goodbye."

Dr. Oliver barely made it to his bed.

His nightmares were terrible. There was a flashing light, a ringing bell and a wobbling pendulum that killed him, killed him, killed him, inch by inch, burying him under a mountain of flashes and clangs and blows while he was somehow too drugged to fight his way out.

He reached fuzzily in the morning for the Dialit, which wasn't there. Good God ! he marvelled. Was one expected to get *up* for breakfast? But he found a button that brought a grinning Mexican with a breakfast tray. After he dressed the boy took him to *los medicos*.

The laboratory, far down a deserted corridor, was staffed by two men and a woman. "Dr. Oliver," the woman said briskly. "Sit there." It was a thing like a dentist's chair with a suggestion of something ugly and archaic in a cup-shaped headrest.

Oliver sat, uneasily.

"The carcinoma," one of the men said to the other.

"Oh yes." The other man, quite ignoring Oliver as a person, wheeled over a bulky thing not much different in his eyes from a television camera. He pointed it at Oliver's throat and played it noiselessly over his skin. "That should do it," he said to the first man.

Oliver asked incredulously: "You mean I'm cured?" And he started to rise.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, rapping a button. Dr. Oliver collapsed back into the chair with a moan. Something had happened to him; something terrible and unimaginable. For a hideous split-second he had known undiluted pain, pure and uniform over every part of his body, interpreted variously by each. Blazing headache, eye-ache and ear-ache, wrenching nausea, an agony of itching, colonic convulsions, stabbing ache in each of his bones and joints.

"But—" he began piteously.

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button again.

He did not speak a third time but watched them with sick fear, cringing into the chair.

They spoke quite impersonally before him, lapsing occasionally into an unfamiliar word or so.

"Not more than twenty-seven *vistch*, I should say. Cardiac."

"Under a good—master, would you call it?—who can pace him, more."

"Perhaps. At any rate, he will not be difficult. See his record."

"Stimulate him again."

Again there was the split-second of hell on earth. The woman was studying a small sphere in which colours played prettily. "A good surge," she said, "but not a good recovery. What is the order?"

One of the men ran his finger over a sheet of paper—but he was looking at the woman. "Three military."

"What kind of military, *sobr'*?"

The man hastily rechecked the sheet with his index finger. "All for *igr' i khom*. I do not know what you would call it. A smallship? A killship?"

The other man said scornfully: "Either a light cruiser or a heavy destroyer."

"According to functional analogy I would call it a heavy destroyer," the woman said decisively. "A good surge is important to *igr' i khom*. We shall call down the destroyer to take on this Oliver and the two Stosses. Have it done."

"Get up," one of the men said to Oliver.

He got up. Under the impression that he could be punished only in the chair he said: "What—?"

"*Silence!*" the woman snarled, and rapped the button. He was doubled up with the wave of pain. When he recovered, the man took his arm and led him from the laboratory. He did not speak as he was half-dragged through endless corridors and shoved at last through a door into a large, sunlit room. Perhaps a dozen people were sitting about and turned to look.

He cringed as a tall, black-haired man said to him: "Did you just get out of the chair?"

"It's all right," somebody else said. "You can talk. We aren't—them. We're in the same boat as you. What's the story—heart disease? Cancer?"

"Cancer," he said, swallowing. "They promised me—"

"They come through on it," the tall man said. "They do come through on the cures. Me, I have nothing to show for it. I was supposed to survey for minerals here—my name's Brockhaus. And this is Johnny White from Los Angeles. He was epileptic—bad seizures every day. But not any more. And this—but never mind. You can meet the rest later. You better sit down. How many times did they give it to you?"

"Four times," Dr. Oliver said. "What's all this about? Am I going crazy?"

The tall man forced him gently into a chair. "Take it easy," he said. "We don't know what it's all about."

"Goddamn it," somebody said, "the hell we don't. It's the commies, as plain as the nose on your face. Why else should they kidnap an experienced paper salesman like me?"

Brockhaus drowned him out: "Well, maybe it's the reds, though I doubt it. All we *know* is that they get us here, stick us in the chair and then—take us away. And the ones they take away don't come back."

"They said something about cruisers and destroyers," Oliver mumbled. "And surges."

"You mean," Brockhaus said, "you stayed conscious all the way through?"

"Yes. Didn't you?"

"No, my friend. Neither did any of us. What are you, a United States Marine?"

"I'm an English Professor. Oliver, of Columbia University."

Johnny White from Los Angeles threw up his hands. "He's an English professor !" he yelled to the room. There was a cackle of laughter.

Oliver flushed and White said hastily : " No offence, prof. But naturally we've been trying to figure out what—they—are after. Here we've got a poetess, a preacher, two lawyers, a salesman, a pitchman, a mining engineer, a dentist—and now an English professor."

" I don't know," Oliver mumbled. " But they did say something about cruisers and destroyers and surges."

Brockhaus was looking sceptical. " I didn't imagine it," Oliver said stubbornly. " And they said something about 'two Stosses.'"

" I guess you didn't imagine it," the tall man said slowly. " Two Stosses we've got. Ginny ! This man heard something about you and your old man."

A white-haired man, stocky in build and with the big, mobile face of an actor, thrust himself past Brockhaus to confront Oliver. " What did they say ?" he demanded.

A tired-looking blonde girl said to him : " Take it easy, Mike. The man's beat."

" It's all right," Oliver said to her. " They talked about an order. One of the men seemed to be reading something in Braille—but he didn't seem to have anything wrong with his eyes. And the woman said they'd call down the destroyer to take on me and the two Stosses. But don't ask me what it means."

" We've been here a week," the girl said. " They tell me that's as long as anybody stays."

" Young man," Stoss said confidentially, " since we're thrown together in this informal fashion I wonder if I could ask whether you're a sporting man ? The deadly dullness of this place—" He was rattling a pair of dice casually.

" Please, Mike !" the girl said in a voice near hysteria. " Leave the man alone. What good's money here ?"

" I'm a sporting man, Ginny," he said mildly. " A friendly game of chance to break the monotony—"

" You're a crook on wheels," the girl said bitterly, " and the lousiest monte operator that ever hit the road."

" My own daughter," the man said miserably. " My own daughter that got me into this lousy can—"

"How was I supposed to know it was a fake?" she flared. "And if you do die you won't die a junkie, by God!"

Oliver shook his head dazedly at their bickering.

"What will this young man think?" asked Stoss, with a try at laughing it off. "I can see he's a person of indomitable will behind his mild exterior, a person who won't let the chance word of a malicious girl keep him from indulging in a friendly—"

"Yeah! I might believe that if I hadn't been hearing you give that line to farmhands and truck-drivers since I was seven. Now you're a cold-reader. My aching torso."

"Well," Stoss said with dignity, "*this* time I happened to have meant it."

Oliver's head was throbbing. An indomitable will behind a mild exterior. It rang a bell somewhere deep inside him—a bell that clanged louder and louder until he felt his very body dissolve under its impact.

He dismissed the bizarre fantasy. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He was Dr. Oliver of Columbia. He had always been.

The Stosses had drifted to a window, still quarrelling. Brockhaus said after a pause: "It's a funny thing. He was on heroin. You should see his arms. When he first got here he went around begging and yelling for a fix of dope because he *expected* that he'd want it. But after a few hours he realised that he didn't want it at all. For the first time in twelve years, he says. Maybe it was the shocks in the chair. Maybe they did it intentionally. I don't know. The girl—there's nothing wrong with her. She just came along to keep the old man company while he took the marvellous free cure."

A slight brunette woman with bangs was saying to him shyly: "Professor, I'm Mitty Worth. You may have heard of me—or not. I've had some pieces in the *New New Review*."

"Delighted," Dr. Oliver said. "How did they get *you*?"

Her mouth twisted. "I was doing the Michoacan ruins. There was a man—a very handsome man—who persuaded me that he had made an archaeological find, that it would take the pen of a poet to do it justice—" She shrugged.

"What's your field, professor?"

"Jacobean prose writers."

Her face lit up. "Thank God for somebody to talk to. I'm specially interested in Tom Fuller myself. I have a theory, you know, about the *Worthies of England*. Everybody

automatically says it's a grab-bag, you know, of everybody who happened to interest Fuller. But I think I can detect a definite *structure* in the book—"

Dr. Oliver of Columbia groped wildly in his memory. What was the woman running on about?

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the work," he said.

Mitty Worth was stunned.

"Or perhaps," Oliver said hastily, "I'm still groggy from the—the laboratory. Yes, I think that must be it."

"Oh," Mitty Worth said, and retreated.

Oliver sat and puzzled. Of course his speciality was the Jacobean prose writers. The foolish woman had made a mistake. Tom Fuller must be in another period. The *real* writers of Jacobean prose were—

Were—?

Dr. Oliver of Columbia, whose field was the Jacobean prose writers, didn't know any of them by name.

I'm going crazy, he decided wildly. I'm Oliver of Columbia. I wrote my thesis on—

What?

The old faker was quite right. He was an indomitable will behind a mild exterior, and a ringing bell had something to do with it, and so did a flashing light and a wobbling pendulum, and so did Marty Braun who could keep a tin can bouncing ten yards ahead of him as he walked firing from the hip, but Marty had a pair of stargauge .44's and he wasn't a gun nut himself even if he could nip the ten-ring four out of five—

The world of Dr. Oliver was dissolving into delirium when his name was sharply called.

Everybody was looking at him as if he were something to be shunned, something with a curse laid on it. One of—them—was standing in the door. Dr. Oliver remembered what they could do. He got up hastily and hastily went through an aisle that cleared for him to the door as if by magic.

"Stand there," the man said to him. "The two Stoss people," he called. The old man and his daughter silently joined him.

"You must walk ahead of me," said the man.

They walked down the corridor and turned left at a command, and went through a handsome oak door into the sunlight. Gleaming in the sunlight was a vast disc-shaped thing.

Dr. Oliver of Columbia smiled suddenly and involuntarily. He knew now who he was and what was his mission.

He was Special Agent Charles Barker of Federal Security and Intelligence. He was in disguise—the most thorough disguise ever effected. His own personality had been obliterated by an unbroken month of narco-hypnosis, and for another unbroken month a substitute personality, that of the ineffectual Dr. Oliver, had been shoved into his head by every mechanical and psychological device that the F.S.I. commanded. Twenty-four hours a day, waking and sleeping, records had droned in his ears and films had unreeled before his glazed drugged eyes, all pointing toward this moment of post-hypnotic revelation.

People vanished. People had always vanished. Blind Homer heard vague rumours and incorporated them in his repertory of songs about the recent war against the Trojans : vague rumours about a one-eyed thing that kidnapped men—to eat, of course.

People continued to vanish through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the growth of population and the invention of census machines. When the census machines were perfected everything was known statistically about everybody, though without invasion of privacy, for the machines dealt in percentages and not personalities. Population loss could be accounted for ; such and such a percentage died, and this percentage pigged it drunkenly in Riveredge, and that percentage deserted wife and kids for a while before it was inevitably, automatically traced—

And there was a percentage left over. People still vanished.

The F.S.I. noted that three cancer patients in Morningside Heights, New York, had vanished last year, so they gave (Temporary) Special Agent Charles Barker a cancer by nagging a harmless throat polyp with dyes and irritants, and installed him in Morningside Heights to vanish—and do something about it.

The man marched the two Stosses and Barker-Oliver into the spaceship.

Minutes later a smashing takeoff acceleration dashed them unconscious to the deck.

Chapter IV

In an earthly navy they would have called Gori "Guns" in the wardroom. He didn't look like an officer and a gentleman, or a human being for that matter, and the batteries of primary and secondary weapons he ruled over did not look like cannon. But Gori had a pride and a class feeling that would have made familiar sense in any navy. He voiced it in his needling of Lakhnut: a brother officer but no fighting man; a sweat-soaked ruler of the Propulsion Division whose station was between decks, screwing the last flicker of drive from the units.

Languidly Gori let his fingertips drift over a page of text; he was taking a familiarization course in propulsion. "I don't understand," he said to Lakhnut, "why one shouldn't treat the units with a little more formality. My gun-pointers, for example—"

Lakhnut knew he was being needled, but had to pretend otherwise. Gori was somewhat his senior. "Gun-pointers are one thing," he said evenly. "Propulsion units are another. I presume you've worked the globes."

Gori raised his fingers from the page in surprise. "Evidently you—people between decks don't follow the Games," he said. "I have a Smooth Award from the last meet but one."

"What class vessel?"

"Single-seater. And a beauty! Built to my orders, stripped to a bare hull microns in thickness."

"Then you know working the globes isn't easy. But—with all respect—I don't believe you know that working a globe under orders, shift after shift, with no stake in the job and no hope or relief ever is most infernally heartbreaking. You competed for the Smooth Award and won it and slept for a week, I dare say, and are still proud—don't misunderstand me: *rightly* proud—of the effort. But the propulsion units aren't competing for anything. They've been snatched away from their families—I'm not certain; I believe a family system prevails—and they *don't* like it. We must break them of that. Come and see the new units."

Gori reluctantly followed Lakhnut to the inport where unconscious figures were being stacked.

"Pah! They stink!" he said.

¶ "A matter of diet. It goes away after they've been on our rations for a while."

Gori felt one of the figures curiously. "Clothes," he said in surprise. "I thought—"

Lakhrut told him wearily: "They have been wearing clothes for quite a while now. Some five thousand of their years." That had been a dig too. Gori had been reminding him that he was not greatly concerned with the obscure beasts between decks; that he, Lakhrut, must clutter his mind with such trivial details while Gori was splendidly free to man his guns if there should be need. "I'll go and see my driver," he snapped.

When he left, Gori sat down and laughed silently.

Lakhrut went between decks to the banks of units and swiftly scanned them. Number Seven was sleeping, with deep lines of fatigue engraved on his mind. He would be the next to go; indeed he should have been shot through the space-lock with Three, Eight-Female and Twelve. At the first opportunity—His driver approached.

"Baldwin," he snapped at the driver, "will you be able to speak with the new units?"

Baldwin, a giant who had been a mere propulsion unit six months ago and was fiercely determined never to be one again, said in his broken speech: "Believe it. Will make to understand somewise. They may not—converse—my language called English. Will make to understand somewise."

Barker awoke staring into dull-red lights that looked unbelievably like old-fashioned incandescent lamps. Beside him a girl was moaning with shock and fear. In the dull light he could make out her features: Ginny Stoss. Her father was lying unconscious with his head in her lap.

A brutal hand yanked him to his feet—there was gravity! But there was no time to marvel over it. A burly giant in a grey kilt was growling at him: "You speak English?"

"Yes. What's all this about? Where are we?"

He was ignored. The giant yanked Ginny Stoss to her feet and slapped her father into consciousness as the girl winced and Barker balled his fists helplessly. The giant said to the three of them: "My name's Baldwin. You call me mister. Come on."

He led them, the terrified girl, the dazed old man and the rage-choked agent, through spot-polished metal corridors to—



A *barber shop*, Barker thought wildly. Rows and rows of big adjustable chairs gleaming dully under the red lights, people sitting in them, at least a hundred people. And then you saw there was something archaic and ugly about the cup-shaped head rests fitted to the chairs. And then you saw that the people, men and women, were dirty, unkempt and hopeless eyed, dressed in rags or nothing at all.

Ginny Stoss screamed sharply when she saw Lakhrut. He was not a pretty sight with his single bulging orb above the nose. It pointed at her and Lakhrut spat guttural syllables at Baldwin. The burly giant replied, cringing and stammering. The monster's orb aimed at Barker, and he felt a crawling on the surface of his brain—as if fingers were trying to grasp it.

Barker knew what to do ; more important, he did it. He turned off Barker. He turned on Dr. Oliver, the erudite scared rabbit.

Lakhrut scanned them suspiciously. The female was radiating sheer terror ; good. The older male was frightened too, but his sense of a reality was clouded ; he detected a faint undertone of humour. *That* would go. The younger man—Lakhrut stooped forward in a reflex associated with the sense of smell. The younger man—men ?—no ; man—the younger man—

Lakhrut stopped trying to scan him. He seemed to be radiating on two bands simultaneously which was not possible. Lakhrut decided that he wasn't focussing properly, that somebody else's radiation was leaking and that the younger man's radiation was acting as a carrier wave for it. And felt vaguely alarmed and ashamed of himself. He ought to be a better scanner than he was.

"Baldwin," he said, "question that one closely."

The hulking driver asked : "You want name?"

"Of course not, fool ! Question him about anything. I want to scan his responses."

Baldwin spoke to the fellow unintelligibly and the fellow replied unintelligibly. Lakhrut almost smiled with relief as the questioning progressed. The odd double-band effect was vanishing and the young man radiated simple fright.

Baldwin said laboriously : "Says is teacher of language and—tales of art. Says where is this and why have—"

"That's enough," he told the driver. "Install them." None of this group was dangerous enough to need killing.

"Sit there," Baldwin told Barker, jerking his thumb at an empty chair.

Barker felt the crawling fingers withdraw, and stifled a thought of triumph. They *had* him, this renegade and his cyclops boss. They had him like a bug underfoot to be squashed at a whim, but there had been some kind of test and he had bluffed them. Wearing the persona of Oliver, he quavered: "What *is* this terrible place, Mr. Baldwin? *Why* should I sit there?"

Baldwin moved in with a practiced ring shuffle and swung his open palm against the side of Barker's head. The agent cried out and nursed the burning cheek. Baldwin would never know how close he came that moment to a broken back . . .

He collapsed limply into the chair and felt it mould to him almost like a living thing. Plates slid under his thighs and behind his shoulder blades accommodating themselves to his body.

"Just to show you nobody's fooling," Baldwin said grimly. He pressed a button on the chair and again something indescribably painful happened wringing his bones and muscles to jelly for a timeless instant of torment. He did not faint; it was there and gone too quickly for the vascular system to make such an adjustment. He slumped in the chair, gasping.

Baldwin said: "Take hold of the two handles." He was surprised to find that he could move. He took hold of two spherical handles. They were cold and slimy-dry. Baldwin said: "You have to make the handles turn rough, like abrasive paper. You do it different ways. I can't tell you how. Everybody has a different way. Some people just concentrate on the handles. Other people just try to make their minds a blank and that works for them. You just find your own way and do it when we tell you to. Or you get the pain again. That's all."

Barker heard him move down the line and repeat the speech in substantially the same words to the Stosses.

Baldwin was no puzzle. He was just a turncoat bastard. The wrecked, ragged men and women with lacklustre eyes sitting around him were no puzzle. Not after the pain. Baldwin's boss, the cyclops—

How long had this been going on? Since Homer?

He bore down on the spherical handles. Amazingly they went from silk-smooth to paper coarse and then to sandstone-gritty. Baldwin was back, peering to look at an indicator of

some unimaginable kind. "That's very good," the big man said. "You keep that up and some day you'll get out of the chair like me."

Not like you, you bastard. Not like you. He choked down the thought. If the boss were here it would have undone him.

There were mechanical squeals and buzzers. Those who were sleeping in their chairs awoke instantly, with panic on their faces, visible even in the dim red light.

"All right," Baldwin was shouting. "Give you bastards ! Five seconds and we cut you in. Give, Morgan, or it's the Pain ! Silver, make it move ! I ain't forgetting anything, Silver—next time it's three jolts. Give, you bastards ! Give !"

Barker gave in a frenzy of concentration. Under his sweaty palms the globes became abrasive. In five seconds there was a thudding shock through his body that left him limp. The globes went smooth and Baldwin was standing over him : "Make it go, Oliver, or it's the Pain. Make it go."

Somehow, he did.

It seemed to go on for hours while the world rocked and reeled about him, whether subjectively or objectively he could not tell. And at last there was the roar : "Let it go now. Everybody off."

Racking vibration ceased and he let his head nod forward limply.

From the chair in front of him came an exhausted whisper : "He's gone now. Some day I'm going to—"

"Can we talk ?" Barker asked weakly.

"Talk, sing, anything you want." There was a muttering and stirring through the big room. From the chair in front, hopefully : "You happen to be from Rupp City ? My family—"

"No," Barker said. "I'm sorry. What is all this ? What are we doing ?"

The exhausted whisper said : "All this is an armed merchantman of the A'rkhov-Yar. We're running it. We're galley slaves."

Chapter V

Three feedings later the man from Rupp City leaped from his chair, howling, and threw himself on a tangle of machinery in the centre aisle. He was instantly electrocuted.

Before he died he had told Barker in rambling, formless

conversations that he had it figured out ; the star-people simply knew how to amplify psychokinetic energy. He thought he could trace eighteen stages of amplification through the drive machinery.

The death was—a welcome break in the monotony. Barker was horrified to discover that was his principal reaction to it, but he was not alone.

They were fed water and moist yellow cakes that tasted like spoiled pork. Normally they worked three shifts in rotation. Only now and then were they all summoned for a terrific surge ; usually they had only to keep steerage way on the vessel. But eight hours spent bearing down on the spherical handles, concentrating, was an endless agony of boredom and effort. If your attention wandered, you got the Pain. Barker got it five times in fifteen feedings. Others got it ten or twelve. Ginny Stoss was flighty of mind ; she got it twenty times, and after that, never. She mumbled continuously after that and spent all her time in practice, fingering the handles and peering into the bad light with dim, monomaniac eyes.

There was an efficient four-holer latrine, used without regard to sex or privacy. Sex was a zero in their lives, despite the mingling of men and women. When they slept in their chairs, they slept. The Pain and then death were the penalties for mating, and also their energy was low. The men were not handsome and the women were not beautiful. Hair and beards grew and straggled—why not ? Their masters ignored them as far as clothing went. If the things they wore when they came aboard fell apart, very well, they fell apart. They weren't going any place.

It was approximately eight hours working the globular handles, eight hours sleeping, and eight hours spent in rambling talk about the past, with many lies told of riches and fame. Nobody ever challenged a lie ; why should they ?

Bull-necked Mr. Baldwin appeared for feedings, but he did not eat with them. The feedings were shift-change time, and he spent them in harangues and threats.

Barker sucked up to Baldwin disgustingly, earning the hatred of all the other "units." But they knew next to nothing, and what he desperately needed was information. All they knew was that they had been taken aboard—a year ago ? Six years ago ? A month ago ? They could only guess. It was impossible to keep track of time within the

changeless walls of the room. Some of them had been taken directly aboard. Some had been conveyed in a large craft with many others and then put aboard. Some had served in other vessels, with propulsion rooms that were larger or smaller, and then put aboard. They had been told at one time or another that they were in the A'rkhov-Yar fleet, and disputed feebly about the meaning and pronunciation. It was more of a rumour than a fact.

Barker picked a thread from his tie each day to mark the days, and sucked up to Baldwin.

Baldwin liked to be liked, and pitied himself. "You think," he asked plaintively, "I'm inhuman? You think I want to drive the units like I do? I'm as friendly as the next guy, but it's dog eat dog, isn't it? If I wasn't driving I'd be in a chair getting driven, wouldn't I?"

"I can see that, Mr. Baldwin. And it takes character to be a leader like you are."

"You're Goddamned right it does. And if the truth was known, I'm the best friend you people have. If it wasn't me it'd be somebody else who'd be worse. Lakhрут said to me once that I'm too easy on the units and I stood right up to him and said there wasn't any sense to wearing them out and not having any drive when the going gets hot."

"I think it's amazing, Mr. Baldwin, the way you picked up the language. That takes *brains*."

Baldwin beamed modestly. "Oh, it ain't too hard. For instance—"

Instruction began. It was not too hard, because Baldwin's vocabulary consisted of perhaps four hundred words, all severely restricted to his duties. The language was uninflected; it could have been an old and stable speech. The grammar was merely the word-order of logic: subject, verb, object. Outstandingly, it was a guttural speech. There were remnants of "tonality" in it. Apparently it had once been a sung language like Chinese but had evolved even out of that characteristic. Phonemes that once had been low-toned were now sounded back in the throat; formerly high-toned phonemes were now forward in the throat. That sort of thing he had picked up from "Oliver."

Barker hinted delicately at it, and Baldwin slammed a figurative door in his face. "I don't know," he growled. "I don't go asking smart questions. You better not either."

Four more threads were snapped from the fringe of Barker's tie before Baldwin came back, hungry for flattery. Barker was on shift, his head aching with the pointless, endless, unspeakably dull act of concentration when the big man shook his shoulder and growled: "You can lay off. Seven, eight—it don't matter. The others can work harder."

He slobbered thanks.

"Ah, that's all right. I got a good side to me too, see? I said to Lakhrut once—"

And so on, while the other units glared.

"Mr. Baldwin, this word *khesor*, does it mean the whole propulsion set-up or the energy that makes it work? You say, '*Lakhrut a'g khesor-takh*' for 'Lakhrut is the boss of propulsion,' right?"

Baldwin's contempt was kindly. "For a smart man you can ask some Goddamned stupid questions. What difference does it make?" He turned to inspect the globes for a moment and snarl at Ginny Stoss: "What's the matter with you? You want the Pain again? *Give!*"

Her lips moved in her endless mutter and her globe flared bright.

The bull-necked man said confidingly: "Of course I wouldn't really give her the Pain again. But you have to scare them a little from time to time."

"Of course, Mr. Baldwin. You certainly know psychology." *One of these days I'm going to murder you, you bastard.*

"Sure; it's the only way. Now, you know what *ga'lt* means?"

"No, Mr. Baldwin."

The bull-necked pusher was triumphant. "There is no word for it in English. It's something they can do and we can't. They can look right into your head if they want to. '*Lakhrut ga'lt takh-lyur-Baldwin*' means 'Lakhrut looks right into underchief Baldwin's head and reads his mind'."

"Do they do it all the time?"

"No. I think it's something they learn. I don't think all of them can do it either—or maybe not all of them learn to do it. I got a theory that Lakhrut's a *ga'lt* specialist."

"Why, Mr. Baldwin?"

Baldwin grinned. "To screen out troublemakers. No hard feelings, Oliver, but do you notice what a gutless bunch of people you got here? Not a rebel in a carload. Chicken-livered. Don't take it personal—either you got it or you don't"

"But you, Mr. Baldwin—why didn't the screening stop you?"

"I got a theory about that. I figure he let me through on purpose because they needed a hard guy to do just what I'm doing. After I got broke in on the globes it wasn't hardly any time at all before I got to be *takh-lyur*."

You're wrong you bastard. You're the yellowest coward aboard.

"That must be it, Mr. Baldwin. They know a leader when they see one."

Four threads later he knew that he had acquired all of the language Baldwin had to give him. During his sleep period he went to old Stoss' chair. Stoss was on rest. He was saying vaguely to a grey-haired woman in the chair in front of his: "Boston, Atlanta, Kansas City—all the prominent cities of the nation, my dear lady. I went in with a deck of cards and came out of each with a diamond ring and a well-filled wallet. My hands were sure, my voice was friendly"

"Atlanta," the woman sighed. "The Mathematics Teachers Association met there in '87 or was it '88? I remember gardens with old brick walls—or was that Charleston? Yes, I think it was Charleston."

"—In one memorable session of stud behind locked doors in the old Muehlbach Hotel I was high on the third card with the Jack of clubs and the ten of diamonds, with the ace of clubs for my hole-card. Well madam—"

"—We had terrible trouble in the school one year with the boys and girls gambling in the reactor room, and worse if you can believe it. The reactor man was their "look-out," so to speak, so naturally we tried to have him discharged. But the union wouldn't let—"

"—Well, madam, there was seven hundred-odd dollars in the pot—"

"Mr. Stoss," Barker said.

The old man studied him coolly for a moment and then said: "I don't believe I care to talk to you, sir. As I was saying, ma'am, there was—"

"I'm going to kill Baldwin," Barker told him.

He was instantly alert, and instantly scared. "But the danger," he whispered. "Won't they take it out on all of us? And he's a big brute—"

"So maybe he'll kill me. But I'm going to try. I want you to go to the latrine when Baldwin shows up next. Don't quite go in. Watch the corridor. If there's anybody coming, lift your hand. I'll only need a few seconds. Either way, it'll be finished by then."

"The danger," whispered Stoss. His eyes wandered to his daughter's chair. She was asleep. And her lips still moved in her endless muttering. "All right," the old man said at last. "I'll help you."

"Can you imagine that?" the woman said, still amazed after all these years. "The man was caught *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak, and the union wouldn't let the principal discharge him without a full public hearing, and naturally the publicity would have been most distasteful so we were forced to—"

Barker padded back to his chair, a gaunt man in stinking rags, wild-haired and sporting a beard in which grey hairs were beginning to appear.

There had to be a lookout. Three times since takeoff Lakhrut had appeared in the doorway for a moment to stare



at the units. Twice other people had actually come into the room with Baldwin to probe through the tangle of machinery down the centre aisle with long, slender instruments.

It might have been one hour ; it might have been seven. Baldwin appeared, followed by the little self-propelled cart. It began to make its rounds, stopping at each chair long enough for the bottle of water and the dish of soggy cake to be picked off. Stoss, looking perfectly innocent, passed Barker's chair.

Barker got up and went to the pusher. Stoss was looking through the door, and did not wave. The car clicked and rolled to the next chair. "Something wrong, Oliver?" Baldwin asked.

"I'm going to kill you, you bastard."

"What?" Baldwin's mouth was open, but he dropped into a fighter's crouch instinctively.

His ankle hooked behind Baldwin's foot. The bull-necked man threw a punch which he ducked, and tried to clinch when he butted him in the chest. Baldwin went sprawling into the tangle of machinery at the same spot where the man from Rupp City had fried. There were sparks and stench. Then it was over.



Baldwin's mouth was still open and his body contorted. Barker could imagine him saying : " You think I'm inhuman ? You think I want to drive the units like I do ?" And he could also imagine him roaring : " *Give, Goddamn you !*"

Steadily Barker went back to his seat in time for the cart to click by. Stoss, his face a perfect blank, padded back from the latrine. A murmur and stir grew louder in the big rectangular room.

Chapter VI

Lakhrut was lying in his hammock in the dark, his fingers idly reading. It should have been a manual ; instead it was an historical romance. His fingers skipped a half-page describing an old-style meal and slowed to absorb the description of the fight in which it ended.

" Yar raises his revolver charged with powder and ball. Who is so brave as Yar ? He pulls back the trigger and presses the hammer of the death-dealing tube ! The flash of flame shows the face of Lurg ! But smoke from the tube obscures—"

His fingers jerked from the page as the commander's voice roared through his cubicle : " *Lakhrut ! Look to your units ! We have no steerage way !*"

He leaped from the hammock and raced through the vessel cursing Baldwin, the maintenance crew, the units and every soul on board.

He took in the situation at a glance. Baldwin lying spread-eagled and charred against the conversion grids. The units yammering and terrified in their chairs, none of them driving. Into a wall mike he snapped to the bridge : " My driver's dead, Commander. He got the charge from the conversion grids—"

" Stop your gabbing and give me power, you fool !"

Deathly pale, Lakhrut turned to the disorganized units and tried to talk to them in remembered scraps of English. (He should have worked more with his driver on it. He should have worked more). They only gawked at him, and he swore in A'rkhov—

But one of the units was doing something that made sense. He was yelling in English, pointing to the chairs. And a dozen of the units resumed their places and began to drive, feebly at first and then better.

That was taken care of. He turned to the machinery and checked rapidly through the stages of amplification. They were clear ; the commander, curse him, was getting his power. The fellow who had yelled at the units was standing by him when the inspection was completed. Startlingly, he said in A'rkhov, though with a fearsome accent : "Can I serve Lakhrut-*takh* ?"

With considerable effort, Lakhrut scanned him. Obedience, fear, respect, compliance. All was well. He asked him coldly : "Who are you that you should speak the tongue ?"

"Name is Oliver. I studied languages. Baldwin *takh-lyur* taught me the tongue." Lakhrut scanned ; it all was true.

"How did he die ?"

"I did not see. Oliver was not looking. I was in darkness."

Asleep, was he trying clumsily to say ? Lakhrut scanned. There was no memory of the death-scene in the scared, compliant mind of this unit. But something nagged Lakhrut and teased at his mind. "Did you kill him ?" he snapped.

The flood of horror and weakness he scanned was indubitable. The unit babbled brokenly : "No Lakhrut-*takh* ! No ! I could not kill ! I could not kill !" Well, *that* was true enough. It had been a silly thing to ask.

"Take me," he said, "to each unit in turn and ask them whether they killed the *takh-lyur*."

This Oliver did and reported twenty-two denials while Lakhrut scanned each. Each was true ; none of the twenty-two minds into which he peered was shuddering with the aftermath of murder ; none seemed to have the killer's coldness and steel.

Lakhrut said to the wall mike : "Power is restored. I have established that my driver's death was accidental. I have selected a new driver from among the units." He turned off the mike after a curt acknowledgement and said to Oliver : "Did you understand ? I meant you." At the mike again he called two maintenance men to clear the conversion grid and space the body.

"Establish unit shifts and then come to me," he told Oliver, and waited for the new driver to tell off the gangs. He ceased scanning ; his head was aching abominably.

Barker felt the fingers leave his brain and breathed deeper. Dr. Oliver of Columbia, the whining incubus on him, was bad company. His own memory of the past few minutes was

vague and fragmentary. In jittery terror Dr. Oliver had yelled at the units to man their chairs before they all were killed for disobedience. In abject compliance Dr. Oliver had placed himself at Lakhrut's orders. And he had heard that he would be the new slave-driver with almost tearful gratitude. To be shaved and clean again ! To dine again ! Barker wanted to spit. Instead he divided the units into new shifts and followed Lakhrut from the oblong room.

He washed and used a depilatory powder that burned horribly as the cyclops monster called Lakhrut silently watched. Somebody brought him shorts that fit. Apparently the concept of a uniform was missing—so even was style. He saw passing on the upper decks crew "men" in trousers, gowns, kilts and indescribably combinations of these. The only common note was simplicity and a queer, vulgar absence of dash, as if nobody cared what he looked like as long as the clothes didn't get in his way.

"That's enough," Lakhrut said, as Barker was trying to comb his wetted hair with his fingers. "Come with me."

Back between decks they went to a cubicle near the drive room—a combination of kitchen, cramped one-man office and hammock-space. Lakhrut briskly showed Barker how to draw and prepare the food for the units—it was the first time he suspected that Baldwin had cooked for them—and how to fill in a daily report on the condition of the units. It was hardly writing ; he simply had to check a box in the appropriate column next to the unit's number. His "pen" flowed clear plastic which bonded to the paper in a raised ridge. The "printed" form was embossed with raised lines. Barker could make nothing of the numerals that designated the units or the column-headings ; the alphabet rang no bells in his memory or the Oliver-memory. But that would come later.

The commander was winding up his critique, and his division officers were perspiring freely.

"As to the recent gun-drill, I have very little to say. What, gentlemen, is there to say about the state of training, the peak of perfection which enabled Gori-takh's crews to unlimber, train and dry-fire their primary and secondary batteries in a mere two hundred and thirty-six and eleven-twelfths *vistch* ? I am sure the significance of this figure will be clear to us all when I point out that the average space engagement lasts

one hundred and eighteen *vistch*. Is the significance clear to you, Gori-*takh* ?”

“Yes, Commander,” said the division officer, very pale.

“Perfectly clear ?”

“Yes, Commander,” Gori said, wishing he were dead.

“Good. Then we will go on to pleasanter subjects. Propulsion has been excellent and uninterrupted since our last meeting. Steerage way has been satisfactorily maintained, units are in reasonable health, mechanical equipment checks out between Satisfactory and Excellent. The surprise-drill calls for driving surges were responded to promptly and with vigour. Lakhut-*takh*, you are to be commended.”

He left the compartment on that note, and the division officers sprawled, sighed and gave other signs of release from tension.

Lakhut said to Gori, with the proper blend of modesty and sympathetic blandness : “It’s just luck, you know. Your bad luck and my good luck. I happen to have stumbled on the most extraordinary driver in the fleet. The fellow is amazing. He speaks the tongue, he’s pitiless to the units, and he’s wild to anticipate my every wish. He’s even trying to learn the mechanism.”

A *takh* vaguely corresponding to the Paymaster of a British naval vessel, with a touch of Chaplain and Purser thrown in, said : “What’s that ? Isn’t there a *Yongsong* order about that ? Perhaps I’d better—”

Lakhut hastily balanced the benefit of a lie at this point against the chance that the *takh*, a master-scanner because of his office, might scan him for veracity. Since scanning of equals was bad manners and he felt himself the *takh’s* equal at least after the commander’s sweet words of praise, he lied. ‘Trying’ does not mean ‘succeeding,’” he said, letting his voice sound a little hurt. “I’m surprised that you should think I’d let an Outworlder into our secrets. No ; the man is merely cracking his brains over an obsolete manual or two of advanced theory. He can barely read, as I’ve repeatedly verified by scanning. His tactile-memory barely exists. What brutes these Outlanders are ! I doubt that they can tell fur from marble.”

The *takh* said : “That is extremely unlikely in view of their fairly-advanced mechanical culture. Take me to him ; I shall scan him.”

Gori tried not to look exultant as Lakhut, crestfallen, led the *takh* from the room.

The *takh* was somehow alarmed when he saw Lakhnut's driver. Even before scanning he could see that the fellow was tough. Vague thoughts of a spotter from Fleet Command or a plant from some enemy—or nominally friendly—fleet drifted through his head before he could clamp down on them. He said to the driver: "Who are you and what was your occupation?" And simultaneously he scanned deep.

The driver said: "Name is Oliver, *takh*. Teacher of language and letters.

The personality-integral included: Inferiority? Self-deprecation/Neurosis? . . . Weakling's job/Shame? Traumata A light. A bell. A pendulum.

Fear, Fear.

Being buried, swallowed, engulfed.

The *takh* was relieved. There was no danger in such a personality-integral. But the matter of security—he handed the driver a fingering-piece, a charming abstraction by the great Kh'hora. It had cost him his pay for an entire tour of duty and it was quite worth it. Kh'hora had carved it at the height of his power, and his witty juxtapositions of textures were unsurpassed to this day. It could be fingered a dozen ways, each a brilliant variation on a classic theme.

The driver held it stupidly.

"Well?" demanded the *takh*, his brows drawing together. He scanned.

The driver said: "Please, *takh*, I don't know what to do with it."

The personality-integral included:

Fear. Bewilderment. Ignorance.

Blankness.

"Finger it, you fool!"

The driver fumbled at the piece and the *takh* scanned. The tactile impressions were unbelievably obtuse and blurry. There was no emotional response to them whatsoever, except a faint, dull gratification at a smooth boss on the piece. And the imbecile kept *looking* at it.

It was something like sacrilege. The *takh* snatched the piece back indignantly. "Describe it," he said, controlling himself.

The fellow began to maunder about its visual appearance while the *takh* scanned. It was true; he had practically no tactile memory.

The *takh* left abruptly with Lakhrut. "You were right," he said. "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he can read, I see no obstacle. And if it contributes to the efficiency of your department, we all shine that much brighter." (More literally, with fuller etymological values, his words could be rendered: "If it amuses the fellow to pretend that he fingers wisdom, my hands are not grated. And if it smoothes your quarry wall, we all hew more easily.").

Lakhrut's hands were not grated either; it was a triumphant vindication of his judgment.

And so, for departmental efficiency, he let his marvellous driver have all the books he wanted.

Chapter VII

Barker's head ached and his eyes felt ready to fall out of their sockets. He did not dare take rubbings of the books, which would have made them reasonably legible. He had to hold them slantwise to the light in his cubicle and read the shadows of the characters. Lakhrut had taught him the Forty-Three Syllables, condescendingly and the rest was up to him. He had made the most of it.

An imagery derived more from tactile than visual sense-impressions sometimes flooded him with subtleties—as, he was sure, an intensely visual English nature poem would have flooded Lakhrut. But he progressed.

Lakhrut had brought him a mish-mash of technical material and trashy novelettes—and a lexicon. The *takh* who had made such a fuss about the chipped pebble had brought him something like a Bible. Pay dirt!

It seems that in the beginning Spirit had created Man—which is what the A'rkhov-Yar called the A'arkhov-Yar—and set him to rule over all lesser creation. Man had had his ups and downs on the Planet, but Spirit had seen to it that he annihilated after sanguinary, millennium-long battles, his principal rivals for the Planet. These appeared to have been twelve-footed brutes who fought with flint knives in their first four feet.

And then Spirit had sent the Weak People to the Planet in a spaceship. Schooled to treachery in the long struggle against the knife-wielding beasts, Man had greeted the Weak People with smiles, food and homage. The Weak People

had foolishly taught them the art of writing, had foolishly taught Man their sciences. And then the Weak People had been slain, all twelve of them, in an hour of blood.

Barker somehow saw the Weak People as very tired, very gentle, very guileless survivors of a planetary catastrophe beyond guessing. But the book didn't say.

So the A'rkhov-Yar stole things. Science. People. Let George do it, appeared to be their morality, and then steal it from George. Well, they'd had a hard upbringing fighting down the Knifers, which was no concern of his. They'd been man-stealing for God knows how long; they'd made turn-coats like the late Mister Baldwin, and judas goats like neat Miss Winston, disgusting creatures preying on their own kind.

From the varied reading matter he built up a sketchy picture of the A'rkhov-Yar universe. There were three neighbouring stars with planetary systems, and the cyclopes had swarmed over them once the guileless Weak People had shown them spaceflight. First they had driven their own ships with their own wills. Then they had learned that conquered races could be used equally well, so they had used them. Then they learned that conquered races tended to despair and die out.

"Then," he said savagely to old man Stoss, "they showed the one flash of creative intelligence in their career—unless they stole it from one of their subjects. They invaded Earth—secretly. Without knowing it, we're their slave-breeding pen. If we knew it, we'd either fight and win, or fight and lose—and die out in despair."

"The one flash?" Stoss asked dryly, looking about them at the massive machinery.

"Stolen. All stolen. They have nations, trades and wars—but this is a copy of the Weak People's ship; all their ships are. And their weapons are the meteor screens and sweepers of the Weak People. With stolen science they've been stealing people. I think at a rate of thousands per year. God knows how long it's been going on—probably since the neolithic age. You want proof of their stupidity? The way they treat us. It leads to a high death rate and fast turnover. That's bad engineering, bad economics and bad housekeeping. Look at the lights they use—low-wattage incandescents! As inefficient lamps as were ever designed—"

"I've got a thought about those lights," Stoss said. "The other day when Lakhрут was inspecting and you were passing out the food I took two cakes instead of one—just to keep in practice. I used slight of hand, misdirection—but Lakhрут didn't misdirect worth a damn. He slapped the pain button and I put the extra cake back. What does it mean when the hand is quicker than the eye but the sucker isn't fooled?"

"I don't get you."

"What if those aren't very inefficient lamps but very efficient heaters?"

"*They're blind*," whispered Barker. "My God, you've got to be right! The lamps, the tactile culture, the embossed writing. And that thing that looks like an eye—it's their mind-reading organ, so it can't be an eye after all. You can't perform two radically different functions with the same structure."

"It's worth thinking about," old man Stoss said.

"I could have thought about it for a million years without figuring that out, Stoss. How did you do it?"

The old man looked modest. "Practice. Long years of it. When you want to take a deacon for a long score on the con game, you study him for his weaknesses. You don't assume he hasn't got any just because he's a deacon, or a doctor, or a corporation treasurer. Maybe it's women, or liquor, or gambling, or greed. You just play along, what interests him interests you, everything he says is wise and witty, and sooner or later he lets you know what's his soft spot. Then, lad, you've got him. You make his world revolve around his little weakness. You cater to it and play it up and by and by he gets to thinking that you're the greatest man in the world, next to him, and the only real friend he'll ever have. Then you 'tell the tale,' as we say. And the next sound you hear is the sweetest music this side of Heaven, the squealing of a trimmed sucker."

"You're a revolting old man," said Barker, "and I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad you're here too," the old man said. And he added with a steady look: "Whoever you are."

"You might as well know. Charles Barker—F.S.I. agent. They fished me out of the Riveredge gutter because I may or may not have telepathic flashes, and they put me on the disappearance thing."

Stoss shook his head unhappily. "At my age, co-operating with the F.S.I. I'll never live it down."

Barker said: "They've got sound to go on, of course. They hear movements, air currents. They carry in their head a sound picture—but it isn't a 'picture': damn language!—of their environment. They can't have much range of discrimination with that sense; too much noise hashing up the picture. They're probably heat-detectors, too. If bedbugs and mosquitoes can use heat for information, so can these things. Man could do it too if he had to, but we have eyes. The heat-sense must be short range too; black-body radiation falls off proportional to the fourth power of the distance. It's beginning to fit together. They don't go *very* near those incandescent bulbs ever, do they? They keep about a metre distant?"

"Yes, I've noticed that. Anything closer must be painful to the heat sense—'blinding,' you might say."

"Then that leaves their telepathy. That specialist came into this room to examine me, which tells us something about the range. Something—but not enough."

Stoss said: "A person might pretend to throw something at one of them from a distance of ten yards. If the creature didn't notice, we'd know they don't have a ten-yard range with sound, heat or telepathy. And the next day he could try it at nine yards. And so on, until it noticed."

"And blew the person in half with those side-arms they carry," said Barker. "Who volunteers for the assignment, Stoss?"

"Not I," the old man said hastily. "Let's be practical. But perhaps I could persuade Miss Trimble?"

"The math teacher? Hell, no. If things work out, we're going to need all the mathematical talent we've got."

They conferred quietly, deciding which of their fellow-Earthmen would be persuaded to sacrifice himself. The choice fell on a nameless half-mad youngster in the third seat of the second tier; he spoke to nobody and glared suspiciously over his food and drink.

"But can you do it?" asked Barker.

Stoss was offended. "In my time," he said, "I've taken some fifty-five really big scores from suckers. I've persuaded people who love money better than life itself to turn their money over to me, and I've sent them to the bank for more."

"Do your best," Barker said.

What approach the old swindler did use, he never learned. But the next day Third Seat, Second Tier, rose during the doling out of the food and pretended to hurl his plate at Lakhrut. The cyclops, ten metres away, stalked serenely on and the young man collapsed in an ecstasy of fright.

The next day is was eight yards.

The next day six.

And other things filled the days : the need for steady driving of the ship, and whispered consultations up and down the benches.

They needed a heat source, something that would blaze at 500 degrees, jangling, dazzling and confusing the senses of their captors. But it was an armed merchantman, a warship, and warships have nothing on board that will burn. Their poor clothing heaped together and somehow ignited would make a smouldering little fire, doing more damage to the human beings by its smoke than to the A'rkhov-Yar by its heat.

Barker went exploring in the cargo spaces. Again and again he was passed in the corridors by crew "men." Huddling against the glowing bulbs, choking down his rage and fear, he imitated the paint on the walls, and sometimes they broke their stride for a puzzled moment, sometimes not.

In a cargo space on the next day he found cases labelled with worms of plastic as "attention sticks" or possibly "arresting or halting tubes."

They were the close equivalent of railroad flares in appearance. He worked the tight-fitting cap of one to the point where he felt gritty friction. A striking surface—but he did not dare strike and test it. These things would have to put out hundreds of degrees of heat, or, if they were intended for use at any appreciable distance, thousands. They were thermal shrieks ; they would be heard from one end of the ship to the other. In three trips he smuggled 140 of the sticks back to the propulsion room. Stoss helped him distribute them among the seats. He grimly told the lack-lustre eyes and loose mouths : " If anybody pulls off one of the caps before I say so, I am going to hit the pain button and hold it down for five minutes."

They understood it for the death threat it was.

" Today's the day, I think," said Stoss in a whisper as Lakhrut made his benevolent entrance. " He sensed something yesterday at four metres. Today it's going to be three."

Barker pushed his little food cart, fingering the broken-off knob of a propulsion chair resting on its lower tray. He moved past Third Seat, Second Tier, Lakhрут behind him. The mad young man rose, picked up his plate and pretended to throw it at the cyclops.

Lakhрут drew his side-arm and blew the young man's head into a charred lump. "Oliver !" he cried, outraged. "Why did you not report that one of your units was becoming deranged ? You should have put him through the space-lock days ago !"

"Oliver's " reply was to pace off a precise four meters and hurl the broken-off knob at the monster. He took a full windup, and rage for five thousand years of slavery and theft drove his muscles. The cyclops eye broke and spilled ; the cyclops staggered in circles, screaming. Barker closed in, twisted the side-arm from the monster's convulsed hand and gave him what Third Seat, Second Tier, had got.

The roomful of men and women rose in terror, screaming.

"Quiet !" he yelled at them. "I've talked to some of you about this. You saw what happened. Those things are blind ! You can strike them from five yards away and they'll never know what hit them."

He snatched up one of the fusees and rasped off the cap ; it began to flare pulsatingly, not very bright, but intensely hot. He held it at arm's length and it scorched the hair on the back of his hand. "These things will dazzle what sensory equipment they do have," he yelled, "and you can confuse them with noise. They'll be coming to get us in a minute. All you have to do is make noise and mill around. You'll see what happens when they come for us—and then we'll go hunting !"

In less than a minute his prediction was verified. A squad of the cyclops crew burst in, and the screaming of the Earth people left nothing to be desired ; the creatures recoiled as if they had struck a wall. From six metres away Barker and Stosses carefully ignited the flares and tossed them into the squad. They made half-hearted efforts to fire into the source of the trouble, but they were like men in a darkened boiler works—whose darkness was intermittently relieved by intolerable magnesium flares. Lakhрут's side-arm made short work of the squad.

Barker ripped their weapons from their fingers and demanded : " Who wants one ? Who wants to go hunting ? Not you, Miss Trimble ; we'll need you for later. Stay in a safe place. Who's ready for a hunting party ?"

One by one, twitching creatures remembered they were men and came up to take their weapons.

The first hunting party worked its way down a corridor, hurling fusees, yelling and firing. The bag was a dozen cyclops, a dozen more weapons.

They met resistance at a massive door with a loophole. Blasts from a hand weapon leaped through the loophole, blind but deadly. Three of them fell charging the door.

" Warm it up for them," Stoss said. He snatched a dozen fusees, ducked under the fire and plastered himself against the door. Meticulously he uncapped the sticks and leaned them against the door, one by one. The blast of heat drove Barker and his party back down the corridor. Stoss did not collapse until he had ignited the last flare and wrenched open the door with a seared hand.

Through the door could be seen staggering cyclops figures, clawing blindly at the compartment walls. The Earthmen leaped through the brief, searing heat of the dozen flares and burned them down.

In the A'rkhov-Yar language, a terrified voice spoke over the ship public address system : " To the leader of the rebels ! To the leader of the rebels ! Return to your propulsion room and your crimes will be forgiven ! Food will be doubled and the use of the Pain discontinued !"

Barker did not bother to translate. " Let's head for the navigation room," he said. " Try to save a couple of them." One hour later he was telling the commander and Gori : " You two will set courses for Earth. You will work separately, and if your results don't agree we will put you each in a chair and hold down the button until you produce results that do agree. We also have a lady able to check on your mathematics, so don't try anything."

" You are insane," said the commander. " Other ships will pursue and destroy you."

" Other ships," Barker corrected him, " will pursue and fail to overtake us. I doubt very much that slave ships can overtake a ship driven by free men and women going home."

"We will attack openly for this insolence," snorted Gori. "Do you think you can stand against a battle fleet? We will destroy your cities until you've had enough and then use you as the slaves you are."

"I'm sure you'll try," said Barker. "However, all I ask is a couple of weeks for a few first-rate Ph.D.'s to go over this ship and its armaments. I believe you'll find you have a first-rate war on your hands, gentlemen. We don't steal ; we *learn*."

"And now if you please, start figuring that course. *You're* working for *us* now."

C. M. Kornbluth