

PLANET STORIES



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Oscar's tentacles writhed delicately.

THE STAR BEAST

By DAMON KNIGHT

They called this strange tentacle-headed blob that had floundered into the System Oscar. They were to learn a better name.

THE OBSERVATION DECK OF the *President Marcus*, this early in the ship's arbitrary morning, was deserted except for two shapeless figures. One of them was dead.

The body was sprawled in the curve of the deck about midway between two of the entrance wells. It had arms and legs, if you looked closely enough at the limp tangle of garments; it had a gray beard and a purple face.

The other figure had neither limbs nor a face. It was black, and it looked more like a pile of mud than anything else: a five-foot lump of black mud, slightly flattened at either side, with a cluster of black, stumpy filaments at the top. It moved slightly, dropping the filaments a little toward the dead body; then it flowed away again, and the filaments pointed straight up, toward the stars.

Phil Horitz came up at the forward

end of the deck. He let the levitor push him gently clear of the well then stepped over to the glassine and looked out at the tiny blue disk that was Earth. His back was to the body and its watcher. He struck a cigarette, inhaling deeply, then turned around.

He swore and threw his cigarette away, leaping forward at the same instant. He skidded to a halt in front of the corpse and fell to one knee beside it. "Dead," he said. "Oh, Lord."

He searched the body swiftly, and came up with a flat metal box, attached by a silver chain to the body's middle. He tried the lid; it opened easily. The box was empty.

Horitz sighed and lifted the dead man's chin. Under the grey beard was a deeply-indented red line that encircled the throat.

He stood up and pressed a button on his wrist transceiver. "Walsh," he said. "Sommers. Get up to the observation deck. *Thomasson has been murdered.*"

A deep voice swore fervently in his ear. He didn't wait for it to finish. He made an adjustment on the transceiver and said, "Captain Tooker, please. This is Philip Horitz." A querulous male voice spoke: "Yes, Horitz? What do you want?"

Horitz repeated his message, and added, "I'm bringing the body down to Thomasson's stateroom. Get the ship's doctor and meet me there."

Two figures exploded out of the levitor well a dozen yards away; one bulky and grey-haired, the other lean and young. They ran up to Horitz, panting. The bulky one, Walsh, was still swearing.

"I watched him like a baby," he protested. "He told me he was going to get up at nine this morning, so I set my watch for eight. *Why* the howling hell did he—"

"Save it," said Horitz. "He did. I'll take his head, Sommers, you take his feet. Walsh, think you can carry Oscar?"

"Listen, Phil," said Sommers abruptly, "are the Equations gone?"

"Yes," Horitz told him. "They're gone."

Walsh grunted and, stooping, wrapped his arms around the black thing. He lifted it without apparent effort. The

stumpy tendrils waved down toward him, then stood upright again, ignoring him. The other two picked up the body of Thomasson, and all three walked back to the levitor well from which they had come.

Captain Tooker and the medical officer, Dr. Evans, met them at the door of the dead man's stateroom. Tooker was boiling over. "Do you call yourselves Security agents?" he shouted. "Three of you, to protect one man, and you couldn't do it. I'll raise hell about this, Horitz, see if I don't."

Horitz and Sommers put the body down on the bed, and Dr. Evans fell quietly to examining it. "We'll find the killer," said Horitz grimly, "or else any hell you can raise will be a sneeze in a gale of wind. You don't know the half of this yet."

"I know that a man has been murdered on my ship," said Tooker.

"A man!" said Sommers, staring at him. "A whole planet may have been murdered, unless we get the Equations back."

"What equations?" said Tooker. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"The Thomasson Equations," said Sommers, "are the answer to the problem of faster-than-light space travel. Prof. Thomasson derived them from observations he made on the space shell this thing—" he gestured at Oscar—"landed on Pluto in, last year."

Captain Tooker glanced at Oscar with evident dislike. "Well," he said, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Have the ship searched," said Horitz quietly; "but that won't do any good. There are a hundred ways the killer could hide the Equations so that no search would ever find them. Our one chance, I'm afraid, is to get the only witness to tell us who garroted Thomasson."

"The witness?" said the captain, staring. "Who?"

Horitz turned to look at the black, five-foot lump, with its gently waving tendrils. "Oscar," he said.

OSCAR had come whirling out of interstellar space almost a year ago, in a thin, cloudy shell hardly bigger than himself. The shell was partly wrecked

and put out of control; but by sheer luck, a supply ship had picked it up and hauled it in to Pluto. The newspapers had labeled its occupant a Centaurian, since he came from that general sector of space; but actually, no one knew. The scientists at the Pluto Station who had sweated over him for a year had found out exasperatingly little. He had no eyes or ears, and yet he was aware of things around him. He had no recognizable brain; he had no skeleton, no lungs, no circulatory system and no excretory system. He got his energy, they thought, from cosmic radiation; but they didn't know for sure.

His tendrils or filaments—the stumpy, fingerlike organs on top of his shapeless body—had no function that they would discover. They did not respond to sound, to light, to heat or any other known radiation—but they followed moving objects, in a dark room as well as in a light one.

He was somehow able to emit and receive radio waves. They were able to communicate with him, after a fashion, that way. They suspected it wasn't his normal method of communication; but when they ticked at him with a Morse sender, he obligingly ticked back. Slowly and painfully, during that year, they had worked up from $1+1=2$, to $9^8=729$, to simple nouns and a few verbs, in a code they invented as they went along. They could talk to Oscar, and Oscar could talk to them. The only trouble was, that nothing Oscar said made much sense—to men.

"That's the whole difficulty," explained Dr. Y. Ilyanov, running her fingers through her thick yellow hair. Dr. Ilyanov was one of the two assistants Thomasson had brought along, and very beautiful. The other was Dr. Hugh Meers, who was bald and not beautiful at all.

"You understand, he perceives—but he doesn't perceive with human senses or think in human patterns. Undoubtedly, he saw Professor Thomasson killed; but he saw it—differently."

"If we could only get some scrap of description," said Walsh. "Surely he can tell size, for instance? If we knew whether the murderer was a big man or a little man, even that would help."

"You're thinking, I'll venture, of a par-

ticularly big man," said Dr. Meers. "Carson Jahore, the ambassador from the Jovian Federation."

Horitz nodded. "A prime suspect. The Federation has always been too big for its planets. They'd give anything for a space-drive that would let them beat Earth to the punch in interstellar colonization."

"Well," said Walsh, "what about my question? Can't Oscar tell the difference between a big man and a little one?"

Dr. Meers' brow wrinkled. "Not in the way a man could," he said. "If you put them side by side, then perhaps yes. Perhaps, mind you. But—don't you see, he hasn't got one of our senses, except touch. Instead, he probably has a whole gamut of his own. Lord only knows how he differentiates between one man and another, or between one apple and another. He doesn't do it our way, anyhow."

"Look here," said Captain Tooker impatiently, "we're wasting time. Why can't we just search everybody on board?"

"Have you got authority," asked Horitz carefully, "to strip Ambassador Jahore and his wife to the skin and put them and all their belongings through five hundred and twenty different chemical solutions? For a starter, that is? If you have, go ahead. I haven't."

The captain shuddered.

"Just the same," said Horitz, standing up, "you're right; we are wasting time. Have you got that passenger list, Captain?"

"Yes; here," Tooker said, producing it. "I've got to get back. If anything happens, buzz me. And it had better be soon!" he added as he left.

"All right." Horitz turned to the two scientists. "Dr. Meers, can you and Dr. Ilyanov make Oscar understand this much: that he's to signal when he sees the man who was with Thomasson on the observation deck this morning?"

Meers shrugged. "We can try," he said. "I don't promise anything." He pulled his chair over to the crude Morse set on the table and began clicking the key.

OSCAR'S tendrils waved slowly back and forth, as if he were interested in anything in the world but radio clicks.

Meers stopped, waited a moment, then tried again.

Tick-tick, said the amplifier.

Meers nodded. "He says yes. Whether he really knows what we want, or not, I can't say."

Horitz spoke into his transceiver: "Central. Will you please page Mr. Abbot, Miss Acheson, Mr. and Mrs. Adler and Mr. Aguirrez? Ask them to come to stateroom B39."

One by one, the passengers whose names began with A were let into the stateroom and presented to Oscar. Oscar said nothing. The passengers, bewildered or indignant, were ushered out and a new batch came in.

They went through the B's, the C's, the D's, the E's, the F's, the G's, the H's, the I's . . . The whole list numbered about 150, some of whom had been shuttled aboard at the Jovian System, others at Mars. Finally Horitz called a halt for lunch. Dr. Meers, pleading indisposition, had gone to lie down in his stateroom. The three Security men were alone with Dr. Ilyanov—and Oscar.

Walsh, munching a corned-beef sandwich, started at the black lump balefully. "Honestly, Dr. Ilyanov," he said, "doesn't he ever give you the creeps?"

She smiled slightly. "Honestly—yes. I dream about him sometimes."

Sommers glanced at her curiously. "What do you dream?" he asked.

"Well—" she hesitated. "It's really silly, but—Last night, you see, I was thinking of something poor Professor Thomasson had said, half-jokingly, when we were discussing Oscar. He said that Oscar might not be a complete organism." She gestured toward the black thing on the table. "You know—his flat underside, that he walks with, and those curious flat areas along his sides? He can grip with those. If you put your hand there, he grips it."

Horitz nodded. "Thomasson showed me that trick." He reached over and put his hand on Oscar's black, glutinous side. "Shake hands, Oscar."

The hand sank visibly in the black flesh. When Horitz pulled it away, there was a small sucking noise.

"Ugh," said Walsh disgustedly.

"Well," continued Dr. Ilyanov, "you know that Oscar's space shell was wrecked. Professor Thomasson suggested that the accident that wrecked it might have wrecked Oscar too—that really, when he is all there, he is three or four Oscars linked together—"

She laughed embarrassedly. "Anyhow, when I slept last night, I had this nightmare. I dreamed that I saw Oscar floating in space, but there was more of him. There was another similar shape attached behind him, and two smaller ones, one on either side. He was like a sort of black cross—with those horrible tassels waving at each point of it—floating along, under the stars . . ."

"Well," said Horitz puzzledly, "what was so horrible about that?"

"Why, I don't know," said Dr. Ilyanov. "But it was."

Horitz crumpled up his sandwich-wrappers and threw them into the waste chute. "Might as well get started again," he said. He picked up the passenger list and read, "Jaeger, Jahore, Jessamin, Johnson."

OSCAR watched interestedly as the beings in the room moved about, trailing their flaming auras. These people had strange and sometimes frightening counterpoints, he thought, but they were undeniably picturesque. He would have a story to tell when he got home.

One of the creatures arose and moved across the room. Its glowing sheath was bright reeve, with radiating streaks of darker gel. Inside, the shadowy nucleus seemed to be constructed differently from the others. Oscar followed it with the waving seelers atop his own nucleus. If he could only get into syntact with that one, he thought, he might find out something about it. Perhaps it had been badly mangled when it was young; or perhaps it was a different species entirely. It was hard to see, with these people.

Two more beings came into the room, one of them tall but with a slight nucleus, shaped like the one he had just been examining. He felt it with interest, but it was as uncommunicative as the other. The

figure beside it was of an uninspiring shape, but its aura was reminiscent. He recalled that something was expected of him.

Carson Jahore was a big man, with the dark skin and fair hair that characterized his race. He was saying loudly, "—I won't stand for it, d'you hear? D'you think you can drag me and my wife in here like any common suspect? I'll hear an apology, or by God, heads will roll!"

Tick-tick-tick, said the amplifier on the table.

"There's your apology," said Horitz, his eyes shining. "Where have you hidden the Equations, Ambassador Jahore?"

"What is this?" roared the ambassador. "What equations? What's that thing? Are you all mad?"

Dr. Ilyanov put a hand on Horitz's arm. "Please," she said, "don't be hasty. We don't know that Oscar understands, remember. Let's at least run through the rest of the passenger list, and see if he picks out anyone else."

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," put in Mrs. Jahore, who was small and sultry. "Come along, Carson, let's go and tell the captain."

"I've already buzzed the captain," said Horitz. He glanced at Dr. Ilyanov. "You're right, of course. Walsh, take Ambassador and Mrs. Jahore into the other room. If they make any trouble, give them a jolt."

Walsh, with his electrogun out, herded the pair into the next room. Jahore's shouts continued for some time.

"Ask Oscar if he was *sure*," suggested Sommers.

Dr. Ilyanov stepped to the Morse sender and tapped out the message.

Tick-tick, said Oscar.

"Well, that's good enough for me," said Sommers, "but we might as well have the rest in, I suppose."

The captain called Horitz via his wrist phone, swore fearfully when he heard that they had bagged the ambassador, and promised to come down later. Horitz continued to read off lists of names to the central operator, bringing in groups of passengers whose nervousness increased as rumors spread through the ship.

HORITZ strode up and down the room, slamming one fist into the palm of the other hand. "There must be something we've overlooked," he said. "We've got to figure out what the semantic block is between us and Oscar. I know it's something simple, I feel it; but—"

Dr. Ilyanov was frowning thoughtfully. "I have an idea," she said. "Did it ever occur to you that Dr. Tooker might be the man we are looking for?"

"Tooker!" said Horitz.

"Yes. You saw how jealous he is of his job on this ship. If the Thomasson Equations were used, he would certainly be put out of work. To a man like that, it would be worse than death. And remember, he has not been in this room since we asked Oscar to point out the killer."

"You might be right," said Horitz slowly. "But even if Oscar put the finger on him, it wouldn't prove anything unless we can find out what Oscar means."

"Please try it," said the girl. "I have—I have a theory."

"Yes," said Horitz.

She flushed slowly. "I know it sounds absurd," she said, "but I think Oscar has been pointing out all the ones on this ship who *could* have killed Professor Thomasson—who had reasons to. I think he perceives that, just as we'd perceive a man's height, or his manner of walking."

Horitz looked at her doubtfully.

"Don't you see," she went on, "that would explain why he pointed out two when we asked for only one? They look the same to him—he can't tell them apart!"

"Maybe you've got it," said Horitz. He opened the transceiver and said, "Captain Tooker, please. Horitz calling."

"Yes, Horitz?" said the captain's voice.

"Can you come down immediately? I think we've got this thing licked."

The captain walked in a few minutes later. "Horitz" he said, you deserve a medal. "Who is it?"

Tick-tick-tick, said the amplifier.

"Maybe you," Horitz told him. He produced his electrogun and waved the

captain over toward the wall. "No offense, but I've got to make sure."

"What!" shouted the captain, his face reddening. "Are you crazy, Horitz? Put that gun down!"

"Shut up," said Horitz, "please." He moved over to the connecting door, opened it and said, "Bring them out."

Walsh and Sommers herded their prisoners back into the room. The Jahores had subsided some time before, but broke out afresh when they saw that they were not going to be released. The captain tried to outshout the Jahores, and it took Horitz a full minute to quiet them.

When they were silent at last, he said. "Oscar has pointed out each of you as the one who murdered Professor Thomasson. Now's the time to confess."

No one said anything. Horitz picked up the passenger list from the table and glanced at it. "All right," he said. He adjusted his transceiver and said, "Stewards' Department? This is Horitz, in stateroom B39. I want the stewards who serve A deck, Section 3, C deck. Section 5, and the Captain's quarters. Get them down here fast."

THE stewards arrived, looking apprehensive. There were five of them in all: two for each of the passenger sections, and one for Tooker. The latter said to Horitz, "Is there anything wrong, sir?"

"Nothing that need worry you," Horitz told them. "Just stand there and answer any questions I may ask you." He turned to Jahore. "Professor Thomasson was killed at a very early hour this morning," he said. "According to the ship's doctor, he had been dead approximately thirty minutes when I found him, and that was at seven-thirty. What time did you leave your stateroom this morning, Ambassador?"

"I don't know that that concerns you, you insolent puppy!" Jahore replied.

"Answer him, dearest" said his wife. "Let's get this beastly business over."

"Oh, very well," said the ambassador. "I was up at nine."

"Is that correct?" Horitz said to the stewards.

One of them spoke up, "Yes, sir, I believe so. I was in the corridor when His Excellency came out, and it was at about nine o'clock, sir."

Horitz bowed slightly. "You have my apologies, Ambassador. You and your wife may go now."

"Just a minute," said Sommers unexpectedly. "Oscar clicked when both the Ambassador and his wife were in the room, didn't he? Mrs. Jahore, when did you leave the stateroom?"

"At ten-thirty," the woman said coldly.

"That's correct, sir," said the steward. "I was working in that section almost all the morning, and I saw Mrs. Jahore leave at that time."

"Please accept my apologies also," said Tooker to the Jahores, trying to curb his apoplexy. "I assure you, sir, that this was none of my doing."

"You're not out of the woods yet yourself, Captain," said Horitz wryly.

Mrs. Jahore tugged at her husband's sleeve, but the ambassador looked interested. "You're in this too, are you?" he said to Tooker. "I think I'll stay and see the finish."

Horitz looked at Tooker. "Well, Captain?"

"I was up at six-thirty," said the captain.

"Right?" said Horitz.

The steward coughed. "Approximately right, sir. I should say that it was more nearly six-forty."

"Where did you go, Captain Tooker?" asked Horitz. "To the control room?"

"Certainly."

"Who was on duty there?"

"First mate—Marshall," said the captain angrily.

Horitz lifted his transceiver.

"All right!" said the captain, raising his hand. "I didn't arrive in the control room until seven-thirty. I can't account for the time, either, or rather I won't. I suppose you think you can burn me for that."

"Maybe," said Horitz soberly. "For your own sake, I advise you to tell me where you were."

The captain wilted suddenly. "I was —visiting a certain lady," he said. "That's all I'll tell you, but it's the truth." He

stiffened again, and glared at Horitz. "If it comes to that, what time did you get up this morning?"

"Seven-twenty," said Horitz. "Well it's one of you two," he began.

One of the stewards coughed. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but what you said isn't true."

Horitz looked at him without comprehension. "What isn't true?" he asked.

"You didn't get up at seven-twenty, sir. I saw you leave at not later than six-forty-five, sir."

Horitz simply stared at him. "What are you lying for?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm not lying," the man said stiffly. "I remember distinctly, because I thought it was odd at the time. You left your room at a quarter to seven, and then I saw you come back about twenty minutes later. Both times, you had a funny sort of expression on your face—sort of dazed, you looked. When you came back, you had some papers in one hand, and you were carrying your belt in the other, sir."

The others were all staring at Horitz.

"His belt!" said Sommers. His gun swiveled to point at Horitz. "I'm sorry, Phil. Drop your gun."

Horitz dropped it, and Walsh scooped it up.

"Then he went into his stateroom and locked the door," said the steward excitedly, "and about twenty after seven he came out again, looking for all the world as if he'd just waked up. I went into the room, being a little curious, and looked around to see if I could see the papers, or anything. I didn't see the papers, but there was scraps of burnt paper and ashes all around the waste chute. It looked to me as if he burnt them up."

HORITZ felt numb. The words he was hearing, incredibly, awoke echoes of memory . . . a memory that had not been there an instant before.

"Burned them!" said the girl, her eyes wide. "But why!"

Sommers was speaking rapidly into his wrist transceiver, and a few moments later the ship's doctor hustled in, carrying his bag.

"Give your belt to Dr. Evans, Phil," said Sommers.

This is crazy, thought Horitz to himself. I'm dreaming. He took off the thin rawhide band he wore about his waist and handed it over to the doctor. *I remember his face, he thought. His purple face as I . . . But I didn't. I couldn't have!*

The doctor took the belt, casting a sharp glance at Horitz, and held it up to the light in his gloved hands. He took a bulky instrument from his bag, clipped a section of the belt into its base and peered at it through the eyepieces. He looked up after a moment and nodded.

"Traces of human skin," he said. "This is undoubtedly the instrument which was used to kill Professor Thomasson."

"I think I understand now," said Dr. Ilyanov slowly, staring straight ahead of her. "We forgot one person who had a motive . . . Oscar! He didn't want us to reach the stars . . ."

She turned until her wide gaze rested on Horitz's face. "And you *shook hands* with him!" she said.

The nightmare boiled up in Horitz's head. Impossible things, memories from nowhere, battled with his sanity: the silent decks, the slow, dreamlike progress upward into starlight . . . and the hideous purple face, staring impersonally into his.

Raging, his mind retreated, flung itself away from the thing that was hurting it. He felt his body in motion, felt himself caught, struggling, but it was as if he were a far-off spectator. The words that came to him were meaningless.

Walsh and Sommers, holding him, looked at each other across the prostrate body. The muscles on Walsh's heavy forearms stood out, and there was sweat on Sommers' forehead. Gradually the struggles subsided: Horitz lay still and white, looking upward at nothing.

Dr. Ilyanov came to kneel over him. She said, "He will be cured. And he can't be punished, of course." She turned her head slowly toward the black shape across the room. "But—" she said—"neither can that thing!"

Oscar's tentacles writhed, delicately.