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HIGH ADVENTURE FOR MEN

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next
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by John Groth

RING AROUND ROSITA

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*In the War of the Worlds the fate
of the Universe hung upon his
answer to the riddle from Space*

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

JOE SKANLAN hesitated, just for a moment, outside the gray plastic door marked General Gordon—Security. He had never walked through that door, and had never expected to. Usually, to be called to Security meant a control examination—hours of monotonous, probing questions, extending over days and even weeks. The questions lasted until Security was satisfied.

With misgivings, he knocked and walked in.

"Hello, Skanlan," General Gordon said. He was a small man, perhaps in his late thirties. Over his face—and over the desk, and the whole dingy little office—there seemed to be a film of dust and weariness. Gordon looked as though he had the worries of the world on his shoulders. In a way, he probably had.

"Not to waste any time," Gordon said in a dry, grating voice, "you are not here for a control-exam. So get that nervous look off your face."

Skanlan's face had been expressionless; but he almost smiled, looking down on Gordon's balding head. The man knew his job didn't exactly put people at their ease.

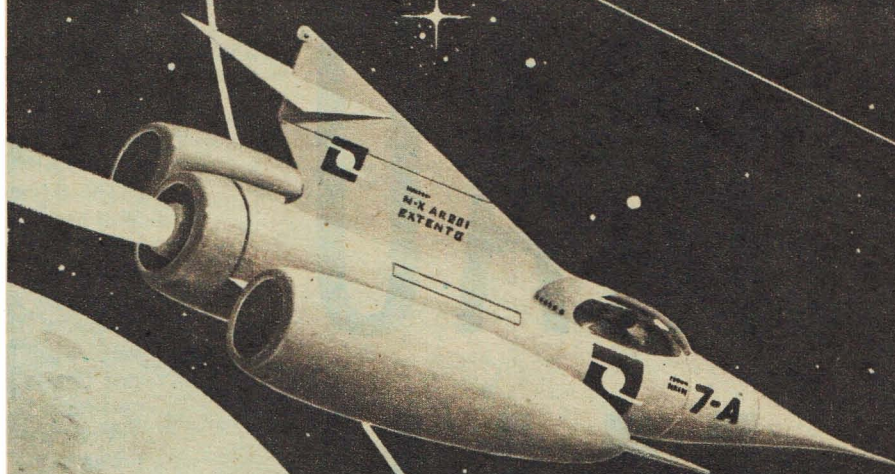
"You've heard of Mells, of course. Well, I want you to keep a 24-hour guard on him." As he talked, Gordon was busy sorting papers.

"He's back on Earth?" Skanlan asked incredulously. Mells, one of the outstanding scientists of the day, had been on an unnamed planetoid for close to three years. The name of the place had never been disclosed, for security reasons, nor had Mells' work. Officially, all that had been admitted was that it dealt with the war effort.

"He's back. I'll bring him to your place this evening. From then on, he's yours. You're to guard him constantly until his work is finished."

ILLUSTRATED BY ED VALIGURSKY

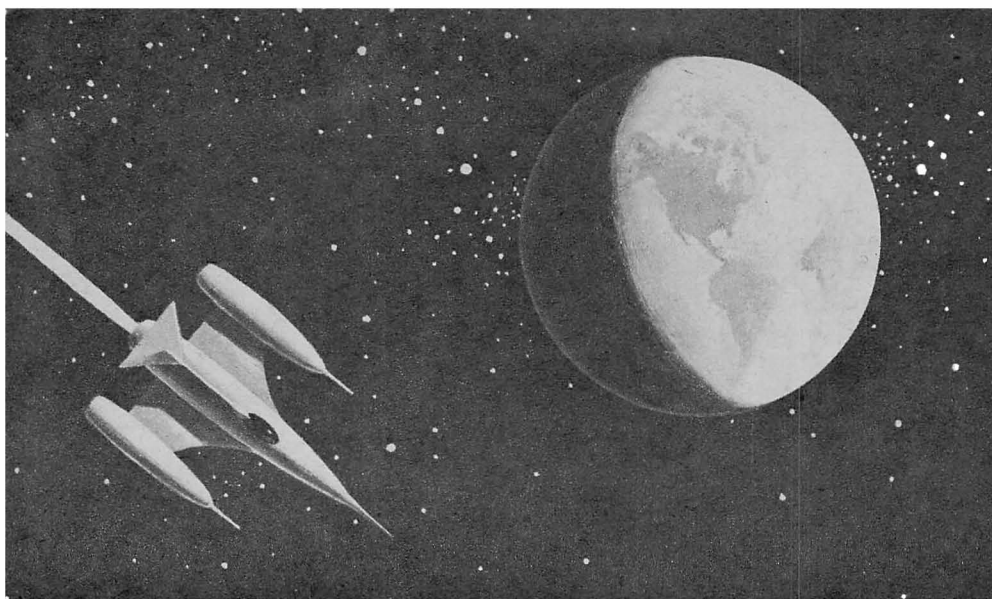
TIME CHECK



FOR CONTROL



• VALIGURSKY



"Just a moment." Skanlan shifted his weight uncomfortably, noticing that the only chair in the room was the one Gordon sat in. "Why me? I mean, a man as important as Mells—I should think he would warrant more protection than a professor of history could give. I'll do my best, of course, but—why?"

WHY you?" Gordon stopped sorting papers. He had an annoyed look on his face, as though he knew the question was inevitable but hated to answer it.

"Why pick a history professor for a job like that?" He hesitated, staring at the floor in front of Skanlan's feet. "The explanation's a little embarrassing. It's almost an admission of incompetency on my part." He stopped, frowning intently at the floor. "I suppose you know, as well as everyone else here on Earth, that Mells is working on a defense against the control-methods of the Hvai. No amount of security could conceal *that*. It's almost done, a device that will make all this time-checking, control-exams and the like, obsolete.

"Unfortunately, the Hvai know it, too. We pulled Mells off the planetoid because one of his closest helpers there became controlled. Almost blew up the place before a guard shot him down. That's the fifth attempt on Mells' life in three years. Five men, Skanlan—men associated with him, around him all the time, carefully checked—became controlled. And in the face of the most stringent hourly schedules we could devise."

Gordon looked up from the floor abruptly, straight into Skanlan's eyes. The effect was startling.

"Still don't know why *you*? Well, here's the rest of it. I bring Mells back to Earth while he's still alive. What would be the normal procedure for

guarding him? Throw a cordon of trusted Security officers around him, with orders to shoot down anyone who blinked twice? But how would that work?"

The question seemed rhetorical, but Gordon was waiting for an answer. Skanlan said, "I suppose your men are as liable to seizure as Mells'."

"Exactly. That's the sort of thing the Hvai are counting on; police protection. It's a certainty they've got controlled men in my bureau, just as they had and have in Mells'. What would my next step be?"

"Hide him away on a desert island," Skanlan suggested.

"That was the planetoid idea."

"I don't know, then," Skanlan said. "If you can't hide him—and can't keep him with people . . ."

"Look at it this way," Gordon broke in harshly. "Normal safeguards won't work because of the nature of the problem. There are variables any way you look at it. Dangerous variables, since Mells' anti-control device is the key to the war.

"I picked you at random, from a group of similarly qualified men. You have a good time-check record, you're intelligent and flexible, and, most important, you're not associated with Mells in any way. That's the idea, right there. Mells isn't going near the police, or Security, or his friends and lab-assistants, until his work is done. They're not going near him. I've seen to that. He's going to be spending his time with you. Not you alone, because that's dangerous, too. But with your friends and associates as well. They'll be watching you, and you'll be watching them. But mostly, *you'll* be watching *them*. You'll be the key man. You'll be with Mells every minute of the time. What do you think?"

Skanlan realized, suddenly, that the

General of Security was asking him for assurance. It was a risky thing Gordon was doing. Even knowing that normal precautions could never keep Mells safe, it was an uncomfortable step, to hand over Earth's top secret to a civilian.

"Under the circumstances, I suppose it's the only thing you can do. To vary the variables."

"I can't avoid the damned variables," Gordon said, staring fiercely at Skanlan. "And I can't handle them all. So I'm making them as unpredictable as possible. If it doesn't work. . . ." He shook his head.

"I was throwing a party tonight," Skanlan said. "Want me to call it off?"

"No. I've notified your friends. They know what your job is."

"Have you told my wife?"

"No. You can tell her yourself. Have you a blaster? No? Then take this one. Use it if you have to." Gordon lifted a Winfield-Sykes blaster out of a drawer and handed it to him. Skanlan looked at the flat, ugly weapon for a moment, then put it in a coat pocket.

"I think that's all," Gordon said. "I don't have to remind you of the importance of the job. Remember, anyone can be controlled. Your best friend, your wife. Trust no one until Mells' work is done. The Hvai are sure to make a move of some sort, and you can't afford to be caught napping. I've told your friends to watch, too. Because even *you* can be controlled."

He dropped his eyes again, first to the floor, wearily, then back to the papers on his desk. He looked terribly worn, a man who suspected everyone. He couldn't even be sure of himself, and he obviously didn't trust Skanlan as much as he would like. There were too many dusty papers on the desk, filled with too much work for one man. Skanlan left.

He found it impossible to get back to work. The unfamiliar weight of the blaster disturbed him, and so did the strange new thoughts it brought. He would have to watch all of them, all his friends. And they would be watching him, Warily, distrustfully. *Is he controlled yet?* they would ask themselves. *Are they, any of them, controlled yet?* he would ask himself. And the bulk of the asking would be on his part, because he would be with Mells all the time. He would live with one hand on his blaster—waiting. And it would come. He was as sure of that as Gordon was.

MENTALLY, he reviewed the outward signs of control—loss of motor coordination, slowness of re-

sponse, lack of time-orientation, effusiveness of speech. The sort of symptoms any drunk might show, but with one tremendous difference. The drunk was actually experiencing something. The controlled person was not. He wasn't experiencing anything. An alien peered out of his eyes, trying to see things on a scale his nervous system was never designed for, trying to master a human's underlying non-verbal responses. Trying to move the automaton fast enough, so it would appear human.

It took thirteen hours of solitude for a Hvai mind to invade and take over a human's. Once accomplished, the Hvai was "in" for as long as he wished. Once "out," he was out for good. It would take thirteen hours again to establish rapport.

The struggle usually began in the dark. A man sleeps for eight hours, on the average. He doesn't appear for work one morning. His wife, or his boss or adjutant, someone, finds the door locked, knocks. The man calls out that he isn't well; he wants to rest for a few hours more. In the early afternoon he emerges. There is no change in him, unless someone notices a slight trembling of the hands, such as any hard-working person might have. Unless someone notices a tendency to drop small objects, or speak more than usual. . . .

A tendency, one day, to blow up an arsenal, sabotage a plant, kill a president.

That, Security believed, was how it usually happened. That was control. The key to it lay in the thirteen-hour period of indoctrination, which most psychiatrists thought was required to break down certain neural safeguards. It took that long, they theorized, to smash through a psycho-physiological defense structure inherent in the human nervous system.

When Security got their hands on this, they set up a time-check. The object was to prevent anyone from being alone too long. On Earth, ten hours was maximum. Anything over that called for a control-exam. Time-check was on a voluntary citizen duty basis. Everyone carried around a notebook to mark down the names and hours of the people he met; everyone made sure that he was never alone more than ten hours.

That, Skanlan knew, was why Gordon was puzzled almost to despair by what had happened on the planetoid. They must have had rigorous checks, those few men with Mells; much more so than on Earth. It was probably unusual if four hours went by without

everyone seeing someone else; or at least, someone seeing everyone.

And yet, the Hvai had managed to seize five minds in three years. How much easier it would be on Earth, even with the intricate system of checking and cross-checking names and hours. Who would they seize first?

Skanlan thought over the names of his friends; their jobs, their habits. Which one?

He left for home early.

He spent most of the early evening over the punchbowl, mixing a complicated pink-and-green Venusian Paradise Punch. He hoped it would cheer everyone up. Leona, his wife, answered the door. She greeted the guests gaily, trying to instill a little party atmosphere into what seemed to be a gathering of vigilantes. She conveyed just the right tone; not frivolous, but relaxed and merry. Skanlan liked that quality in her. He was sure, however, that everyone could see the bulge in his coat pocket. He hoped it would be taken for a cigarette case.

HE TRIED to catalogue the names of his guests, but couldn't seem to concentrate on them. The punch was occupying all his attention. As soon as he discovered which of the seventeen vital ingredients he had left out, it would be done. Now which was it? Vermouth? Skala? No, there were the empty bottles. Bitters? Lime, more than likely. He straightened up for a moment, hearing the doorbell chime again.

Finding a lime, he squeezed exactly three drops into the concoction. As the lime dissolved, the green became darker, the pink streaks showed through it like jagged lightning. Like hell's own cauldron, he thought. Then he saw Mitch Morris, the latest arrival, grinning broadly at him. As a matter of fact, all six feet and two hundred pounds of him were grinning broadly. Morris wasn't the sort to be intimidated by a little call from Security. The rest of the guests were trying to act as though nothing unusual was taking place. Not Morris.

"I saw your hand shake," Mitch boomed with comic seriousness. "Loss of motor coordination—a sure sign! And you're guarding Mells!"

Skanlan found it very unfunny. A few people around them laughed; it was going to be a party after all. With Morris, it was always a party. He never lost an opportunity to accuse Skanlan, or his wife, of being controlled. He wasn't going to stop now.

"I have it on good authority," Skanlan came back, "that you were holed

up in your cellar three minutes past Limit. Will seven or eight of you seize him, please," he finished, appealing to the guests. That brought a laugh, also.

They'd laugh at anything. That's how they were, Skanlan knew. Trying to show that the war strain wasn't showing on them. Treating time-check as a big joke. Acting as though being controlled were the funniest thing in the world. *Well, what the hell?* he told himself. *If we took it too seriously, we'd all crack up. Like nuts in May, or whenever nuts crack.*

"Pretty good," Morris said. "Now where's that guest of yours?" He scooped up a glass of punch, tasted it and smacked his lips. "Good Venus, this. . . . Come on, where is he? I won't assassinate him!"

Skanlan tried to smile. He found that, unconsciously, he had clamped his hand on the butt of the blaster. *Morris protests too much*, he told himself. *Over-verbose*. The man had always been that way, but still. . . . He would have to keep an eye on him.

"Mells is a little late," Skanlan said. He looked around for his wife.

"I'll report him," Mitch said humorously, in too loud a voice. "I'll have him scanned. Or blasted. Then his secret will die with him." He waited for the laugh, then pulled out his notebook, and jotted down the names of the people around him. Everyone was doing the same, marking down Morris' name and time of arrival. Skanlan unglued his hand from the blaster and picked up a pencil. He found his notebook under a bottle of gin and forced himself to go through the motions of time-check. Mitchell Morris-time-check-2045, by his wrist chronometer. He glanced quickly over his list—yes, he had everyone checked. As host, he had to be accurate.

MORRIS wandered to the other side of the room to get in the rest of his time checks. The knot of people around the punchbowl slowly dissolved. Skanlan started transferring the contents of the punchbowl to tall, frosted glasses. He knew, without turning around, that his wife was nearby, walking toward him.

"'Lo, honey," she said softly, behind his shoulder.

"Hi, tall, dark and splendid," he replied lightly, filling a glass for her. "Nectar for my lady?" He handed her a pink and green glass with elaborate casualness.

"Prithee, thanks." She winked at him over the rim.

"Has Mitch (*Continued on page 95*)

Time Check for Control

continued from page 57

accused you of being controlled?" he asked her, returning the wink.

"He intimated that I was head of the Hvai. Of course, I laughed politely."

"War is hell on introverts," Skanlan told her. "We'll have to keep an eye on him. I—"

"The doorbell!"

Skanlan answered it himself, certain that it would be Mells. One look at the man at the door told him he was right.

High forehead, thick glasses. Dark clothes, hanging loosely off sloped shoulders. The pallor of a man who has spent a long time on a strange planet, one unwarmed by a friendly, nearby sun. He was of average height. Skanlan guessed his age as somewhere in the middle forties, a good ten years older than himself. Gordon stood beside him.

"Here he is," Gordon said. He turned quickly and left. Skanlan didn't even have time to invite him in.

"Sorry to be such a bother," Mells said mildly.

"Not at all," Skanlan replied. He liked the man at once. "Come on in."

He led his distinguished guest inside. Fumbling in his pockets, he realized that his notebook was still over by the punch-bowl. He went over to it and noted Mells' time of arrival: Time check—2058. Above the noise, he could hear Mells' voice saying, "Do I have to write down everybody's name?" Mells wasn't used to civilization's methods of group-protection, Skanlan decided.

Leona was beside him again. She rested one hand on his shoulder, looking in Mells' direction. The man was having a difficult time of it already, trying to cope with a barrage of questions from all sides.

"Is he safe, Joe?" she asked. "With all those people around him?"

"I don't know," Skanlan replied, remembering his job. "I think we'd better cut him out of the crowd." Together they moved in, and managed to extricate Mells from the people who surrounded him. Skanlan had a hand on his blaster all the time, not sure whether he felt ridiculous or not, as they steered Mells through a side door, into Skanlan's den. Mells sank gratefully into one of the red leather chairs.

"We thought you might like a little quiet to begin with," Skanlan said. "I can vouch for all these people, but still—"

"Thanks," Mells smiled gratefully. "Nothing like this on Opal II. Frankly, I much prefer a quiet talk, and—thanks!"

Leona Skanlan had quietly uncorked her husband's 2245 Chianti. Graciously, she filled two glasses. Skanlan felt very proud of his tall, slender wife.

"I think I'd better go back to the guests," she said. "I'll make your excuses for you." She closed the door quietly behind her.

"Lovely woman," Mells said.

"The best."

They sat in silence for a while, sipping the Chianti. To Skanlan, it seemed very natural. The war was very far away at that moment, and the Hvai just a dim, unpressing menace. He noticed Mells' gaze, fixed upon the fifteenth century stiletto hanging from the side wall.

"A symbol of the times," Skanlan said, shaking himself out of his lethargy.

"More appropriate if it dangled by a silk thread," Mells murmured, smiling. "Over our heads, I mean."

"It is."

"Not for long," Mells told him. "All I need is a few days. A week at most."

"Fine," Skanlan said. "I suppose you'll want to start in the morning?" He heard Mells answer, but he wasn't listening. There seemed to be something wrong.

Nothing tangible, it was like a subtle irritation, or an altering of a sound he'd heard for so long that it had ceased to register on his consciousness. Ceased, that is, until it changed pitch. He listened carefully, hand near his blaster. *It's my nerves*, he thought. Mells didn't seem to notice anything.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Mells said. "In your capacity as an expert—what do you think of this war?"

"I view it as an inevitability. Two expanding races, both with their full quota of stupidity, mismanagement, enthusiasm, hatred—" Skanlan broke off. There it was again, that feeling he couldn't pin down. After a moment he ignored it. Mells wanted to talk about the causes of the war.

Interplanetary travel had been sluggish. No one wanted to live on the arid Martian deserts; the Venusian swamps were even less appealing. Mercury and Jupiter were out of the question, as were the rest of the planets; except for a few scientific expeditions, the solar system was left alone.

The development of the interstellar drive touched off the powder keg. Habitable planets were discovered, some of them veritable paradises. They were to be had for the asking. And the mystery, the romance of it all! Cassiopeia! Aldebaran! Names to conjure by!

Romance and nationalism, in a day when nationalism had seemed doomed. Antares for the Irish! Hercules II and III for the Swedes!

Nationalism and minority feeling were tremendously forceful agents. Every nation had its legends, its wild, bold adventurer-myths. There were the Vikings, the Cowboys, the Golden Horde. With interstellar travel, every man who ventured forth was a potential hero. Every spaceship filled with Chinese, Indians or Zulus was a myth-in-the-making, a story to be handed down from generation to generation. It was sheer ego-stuff, a challenge few could pass up.

Millions wanted to go. The ships left Earth by the dozens, then by the hundreds and thousands. The over-all birthrate climbed to unprecedented heights.

"Those were the great days," Skanlan said. "The early days of the space-rush. I suppose everyone thought it would go on indefinitely."

Mells didn't answer at once. He seemed sunk in thought, staring into his half-emptied glass of wine. The indirect lighting of the room glinted from one side of his glasses, making the only sharp points of light in the soft, comfortable room.

"I suppose so," he said at last. "If anyone bothered to think at all."

Space is never conquered. Star-systems are not conquered, nor even planets. Only the inhabitants are conquered, non-human inhabitants for the most part, aliens. They are slaughtered indiscriminately by decision of frontier law, decimated by decree of the drawn blaster. Time to think about justice later—much later.

Many of the planets were populated solely by rudimentary life-forms. Once, evidence was found of an unimaginably ancient civilization, older than the Earth itself. It had long since crumpled. Humanoids were found several times, in a stone-age state of development. But the luck couldn't last forever.

Three ships filled with German emigrants contacted a Hvai planet. One fought free, escaping to tell about it.

"By the way," Mells said. "Is there any historical parallel for the General Zorine affair?"

"Not really. Have some more wine. Is your secret really secret?" Skanlan asked. "I mean, can it be talked about at all?"

"Oh, yes," Mells said. "Not in detail, of course, but the general idea."

"Fine," Skanlan filled both glasses again with the deep red wine. "I've been quite curious. The Zorine affair? Only surface parallels. Hvai control throws everything out of perspective. It's the delayed-action dagger."

Mells looked at the stiletto on the wall. Skanlan watched him, then glanced nervously at the door. The party was getting boisterous; he could hear noises, even through the thick oak door.

"Well, I think we have the armor for the Hvai dagger," Mells said.

One would assume that there would be room enough in the galaxy for two expanding races, especially since they had totally different requirements for a "livable" planet. That philosophy, which never functioned well on Earth, had no better success in space. Besides, there were two ships to be avenged. A fleet was mounted, and the war, at least nominally, begun. In a year there were two Earth fleets, and in fifteen months, eight. The Hvai made no peace overtures, gave no indication of being interested in sharing a rather good-sized galaxy. This was their most human quality.

An all-out battle wasn't fought for almost two years.

The commanders of the Earth fleets had every reason to believe they would be successful. In small engagements, in dog-fights and skirmishes, Earth's armament and speed had been decidedly superior to the aliens'. They seemed to have a slight numerical superiority, as well. The second year was spent in endless maneuvering between the stars, establishing bases and communication lines and working out, for the first time in their experience, the technical problems of fighting a war in space. Finally the two forces closed. And Earth received the shock of its life.

General Zorine, one of the fleet commanders, serenely ordered his ships to attack their own lines! Some ships obeyed, spearheading the enemy attack. Others hung irresolutely, unable to believe their orders. The Hvai took full advantage of the mixed-up situation, pouring the bulk of its fleet into the gap. Zorine was cut down by a quick-thinking lieutenant and his orders countermanded before the damage was irreparable. The battle saw-sawed, wavered, and finally ended indecisively. Earth's losses had been staggering, but the Hvai had overestimated the factor of confusion.

Zorine wasn't a traitor. He had been "controlled." That was when they found out about it. Both fleets withdrew to regroup.

The enemy was a telepathic reptilian species. The fact had been concealed, to provide a secret weapon at the right time. Its potency had been demonstrated; probably, only the loose organization of the Earth fleets had saved them from total annihilation.

The facts about the Hvai were discovered by another general, a man named Lester. He took charge of the seventy-four prisoners and had them questioned individually. The psychiatrists who worked under Lester were picked men, ingenious and sadistic. It was not a very pretty story, the way they gathered their information, but when they were through, seventy-four sets of answers lined up. After that, the prisoners were allowed to die. They were grateful for the favor.

A great deal was learned about the nervous system of the Hvai, what they didn't like and how much of it they could stand. But most important, there was the information about the thirteen-hour limit. This was wrenched out of seventy-four reptilian minds—they talked to their captors telepathically—along with the additional, and highly welcome information, that the effects of control weren't permanent. Once

the alien mind had withdrawn, as it would if its host were captured, the victim would recover, exactly as he would from any traumatic shock.

This led to time-check and control-exam. Mells' work began, and actual hostilities were, temporarily, stalemated. Lester was awarded the highest honors Earth could bestow.

"Do you carry a blaster?" Skanlan asked. They had talked for more than an hour, rehashing most of the events of the war. Mells had explained his device, but it was beyond Skanlan's limited knowledge of scientific subjects outside of history. He had a vague idea of what Mells meant by wave amplification, repulsion field, and phase-canceller, but how they fitted together, why they did what they did, was too technical for him. The important thing was that the device was small, easily manufactured, and fool-proof.

"A blaster? No, I don't," Mells smiled deprecatingly. "My job is to duck, not shoot back."

"Mmmm. Yes, but how about those men on the planetoid? Wouldn't a blaster have been convenient?" Skanlan filled both glasses again. They had been talking so steadily, they had barely finished one whole glass each.

"I'm much too clumsy with a blaster," Mells said. "I'd rather depend—"

The door opened, too suddenly for Skanlan's nerves. He leaped to his feet, blaster out. Then he sat down again, smiling sheepishly. It was his wife, and a guest. Skanlan didn't put the blaster away.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you," Leona said. "But Doctor Shane has to go and he wanted to meet Professor Mells."

"Delighted," Mells said, getting up. Skanlan watched narrowly as Mells shook hands with the white-haired old doctor. Automatically, he put Dr. Shane on his "suspicious" list.

"And Mitch Morris insists on seeing him," Leona Skanlan said to her husband. She made a little face, to show that she had kept Morris off as long as possible.

"Come on," Morris' voice bellowed from the next room. "I just wanna shake hands with the guy!"

"After Dr. Shane leaves," Skanlan said coolly. Again he had that feeling of an altered tone, just outside his range of hearing. Morris was now number one on the list.

In the next few days Skanlan really learned what suspicion was. He learned to view every waiter, every taxi driver, as a possible control. He learned to view anyone who came in contact with Mells—for any reason—as possibly having other motives. In their trips between the laboratory and Skanlan's house, not much was ever said. Skanlan was too busy, hand on blaster, waiting, waiting.

In a few days' time he was transformed; no one who had known the calm, easy-going history professor would have thought him capable of becoming a slit-eyed gunman, practically overnight. Even his wife became alarmed when, one day, he drew his blaster on her in a single nervous reflex. She had spilled a cup of coffee, and that was his automatic action.

Skanlan didn't hear from Gordon again. He could picture the little man in his office, worrying. It didn't bother him. He had enough to worry about himself. He had his list of suspects, topped by Mitch Morris, who had seen Mells twice more in four days. Morris was followed by Shane, who had seen him once more. Skanlan suspected Shane because he seemed so harmless.

He had his private worries. That sense of something wrong bothered him more and more. In five days time he felt as though he were simply an extension for a blaster, topped by a pair of eyes. Something else bothered him.

Opal II, the planetoid. How had the Hvai controlled men there? Mells confirmed, as he had thought, that not more than four or five hours had ever gone by in which a man was completely alone. How had they been seized? Perhaps the thirteen-hour limit was no longer in effect . . . if there had ever been a thirteen-hour limit. If not, then Lester's sadistic psychiatrists had been fools. They had been deceived.

By seventy-four prisoners, tortured past all endurance? It didn't seem possible.

Mells didn't appear to be affected by the strain. He worked eighteen hours a day, serenely saving his strength. Skanlan was unable to help him. Day after day he paced around Mells' laboratory, scowling at the instruments. On the fifth day he brought a book, but he couldn't read it. Even without anyone else there, Skanlan couldn't relax.

There were incidents, of sorts. On the morning of the fifth day, Mells and Skanlan were at Skanlan's house, eating a hurried breakfast. The doorbell sounded, and Skanlan felt the nagging irritation that had been bothering him so long.

"Come in," he called.

Mitch Morris came rushing in, and almost had his head blown off. Skanlan had been geared, mentally, for a slow entry; when Morris dashed in the blaster went off almost of its own accord. It was a close call. The blast missed Morris by a few inches.

"Cripes!" Morris gasped, frozen to the spot. "What—"

"Search him," Skanlan barked at his wife. She found nothing more lethal than a fountain pen.

"You've got me all wrong, Joe," Morris said unevenly. "I only wanted to—"

"Get out," Skanlan said.

"Listen, Joe—"

"Get out. If I made a mistake I'm sorry. But don't let me see you for a week or two." Morris left hastily, almost tripping over the rug. The breakfast continued in silence.

On the morning of the sixth day, Mells announced quietly that he was almost finished. Skanlan nodded silently. He was haggard, unshaven, his eyes pouched from lack of sleep. He sat down on a stool beside Mells, watching him work. The *something wrong* feeling was back again, buzzing through a three-day headache.

Mells was surrounded by a maze of electrical equipment. Under his hands a machine was taking shape. Skanlan watched as the scientist screwed its tiny parts together with a jeweler's screwdriver. He heard a noise outside the lab door.

"Who's there?" he asked, walking over to it, blaster in hand.

"Joe," his wife called. "Don't open the door!"

"What?"

"It's Morris. He's controlled!"

For a moment, Skanlan's vocal cords were frozen. He threw a quick glance at Mells. The man was serenely working on his machine.

"He came to the house," Leona Skanlan gasped from the other side of the door. "He had a blaster in his hand, and I—I never saw anyone look that way. I went out the back door and ran all the way here. Don't open the door, Joe! He's outside the building, waiting."

Skanlan unbolted the door, opened it a foot and, keeping himself shielded by it,

grabbed his wife by the arm. He yanked her inside, slamming the door again so quickly he almost caught her foot.

"Get to the phone, Mells," he shouted. "I'm going to—" The blaster was torn out of his hand.

Leona, his wife, had it. Her knuckles were white against the handle, and on her face was a look of implacable hatred. She was squeezing the trigger.

Leona! Skanlan realized everything in that fraction of a second. It wasn't his wife standing there. The being was a Hvai, masquerading in borrowed flesh. He realized then how they had controlled the men on Opal II. But it was too late.

His thigh muscles knotted as he lunged, and he knew he wouldn't make it. He threw himself low, hoping to escape the bolt. But she had started to crumple, even before he hit her.

"All right," Mells said, standing beside his work table with the completed machine in his hands. "It works."

Skanlan picked himself up. He took the blaster from Leona's hand, looked at it, and put it back in his pocket. One part of his mind told him that Mells had used his invention.

Another part told him that there was someone at the door. Everything was happening too fast.

"Who's there?" Skanlan asked, taking out the blaster again.

"Mitch," the voice said. "Listen, what I wanted to tell you yesterday—it's about that planetoid. I've got it doped out. And I saw your wife leave the house in an awful rush. Is anything—"

"You can't come in," Skanlan said. "I'll see you next week."

"I heard some noises. Was there—"

"Get out of here!"

The footsteps faded away. Skanlan looked around. Mells was bending over Leona.

"She'll be all right when she comes to," he said, straightening. "I think I had better tell the War Department the machine is now ready."

"It was damn stupid of me," Skanlan said. "Letting her in. But I thought—"

"Of course," Mells said sympathetically.

"I suppose you understand now about control?"

"I think so," Skanlan said. "The Hvai controlled their own men who had been captured. Probably could do it instantaneously. No wonder Lester got the same wrong answer seventy-four times."

"It actually takes about five hours," Mells said.

"When did you work this out?"

"This morning. Your wife was controlled then. I could tell; don't forget, I've seen it five times before."

"Then why—" Skanlan knew, but he still had to ask. "Why didn't you say so this morning? Or now, when she was at the door?"

"With you the way you were? Oh, no, Skanlan. You were too keyed-up; you might have used the blaster. And I have far too much respect for Mrs. Skanlan to see that happen." He looked at the unconscious woman, shook his head and concluded: "Besides, I had to be certain the invention worked. What better chance of testing it had we?"

He turned and walked to the telephone. Skanlan put his blaster in his pocket. Then he took it out again and sat down on the floor beside his wife, facing the door.