

SUPER-SCIENCE

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WHICH WAS THE MONSTER?

by DAN MALCOLM

You really shouldn't judge a creature to be a monster just by its appearance. A monster should be judged by its deeds. One who does monstrous things is a monster

THE High Command had told—no, *ordered*—Ben Chase to get the message through, and Chase was going to get it through, no matter what costs it involved. They gave him the message at the Terran outpost on Zenuon, and told him to deliver it to the Terran Defense Ministry at London, Earth.

It was a very simple message. Chase had no idea of its contents, but it took the High Command only six hours to imprint the text on the molecules of his brain. A mild electric jolt, applied in just the right way, would shake the message out. No other method, neither torture nor narcohypnosis nor

deep probe, would expose the message. There was no way Chase could possibly lose or forget the message, nor could it be intercepted except by permanently intercepting Chase himself.

It was a foolproof system. Communications lines could be scrambled or tapped; codes could be broken. But imprint a message on the very mind of a human being and send him forth, and the message will get through—unless he is caught.

Relaxing in his one-man spaceship as it sliced through the darkness, Ben Chase wondered what his chances were of getting caught.

Capture, of course, would



mean death, if not sooner than later; the Enemy would be able to read the upper layers of his mind, and they would learn that he was the courier of a secret message—and they would strip away the layers of his mind like the skin of an onion, in their desperate and necessarily unsuccessful attempt to peel that message forth.

The thought of death or torture did not frighten Chase, though he did not welcome the idea. He was a civilian attache to the Terran War Staff on Zenuon, a man whose status was not quite that of a full-fledged military man. His main duties were spy activities, though when called upon he served as a courier.

This was the sixth time he had ferried a message across the five hundred light-years between Zenuon and Earth. Five times he had slipped through the Enemy lines without trouble. He had every reason to believe his luck would hold out.

He was a small, lean man without an ounce of spare fat; just now his face was covered with thick black stubble that

accentuated the sharpness of his keen features. He would not shave for the ten days it took him to reach Earth. Shaving might destroy the image he hoped to display in case of capture: that of the interstellar rum-runner, piloting a cargo of forbidden *Znath* to Terra. If he looked shabby and disreputable enough, perhaps they might believe him and release him without serious interrogation.

Perhaps.

THE ship was a meteorite-pitted old clunker with a false hold that any competent searcher was bound to discover. The *Znath* was hidden, none too thoroughly, down there. The War Staff had provided him with five cases of the stuff, by way of a cover for his trip.

Chase had set a Great Circle course, arching up above the plane of the galactic ecliptic to take him past the thickest concentrations of Enemy interceptors.

The course he had plotted out for himself took him past the thinly inhabited Gysl worlds, then through the totally empty and barren Thuuk sys-

tem, and finally past the rather more populous commercial worlds of Stialak.

After that, it would be clear sailing to Earth, unless there had been some shift in the battle lines since his last trip. The war ranged over thousands of light-years of space; there was no telling what worlds might be drawn in next.

It was Earth against the Vengilan Confederation, at least at the beginning—a massive struggle for control of the galactic trade routes, begun reluctantly by both sides but pursued with grim vigor ever since. The war was thirty years old now, and no finish was in sight.

A network of alliances and ententes had drawn in practically every civilized planet in the galaxy by now. Zenuon was pro-Earth; Stialak leaned toward the Enemy side. The galaxy was divided. Destruction and chaos reigned.

Chase no longer worried about the rightness or the wrongness of the conflict. He was a Terran; he was a spy. Those were the only things that mattered to him. He served

Terra to the best of his wily abilities, and eventually he would pay the spy's price. But not yet, he thought. Let this message get through, first.

The first leg of the voyage was without event. Chase's little ship shot upward through the zone of safety that surrounded Zenuon for a dozen light-years in all directions, and, leaving it, streaked for the Gysl system.

The six Gysl planets were theoretically neutral; in practice, they inclined toward the Enemy way of thinking, but the planets were so lightly populated that Chase did not worry about trouble there. He skimmed the Gysl system at a speed of three lights and kept going. Two days had elapsed; eight more and he would be home free.

Within his ship he relaxed, checking the automatic controls every time the sound of the gong told him he had reached the checkpoint, and spending the rest of his time eating, reading, and sleeping.

On the fourth day—he was in the region of the twelve uninhabited planets of the Thuuk

system now—his subetheric radio began to set up the steady, piercing whistle that told him someone within a fifty light-year radius was trying to call him.

Chase hesitated a moment. He could ignore the call and continue accelerating—but that might be inviting a blast of energy from an alien neutron-gun. It was wiser to reply, find out who was calling, what they wanted, before doing anything else. When a sentry cries, "Halt!", it's never smart to break into a run.

Elbowing up from his pneumo-est, Chase made his way through the narrow companion-way of the tiny ship and into the control room. He twirled dials on the subetheric communicator, while the insistent whistling sound continued, growing more intense.

Suddenly the earsplitting scream modulated pitch and turned into a mellow, booming sound—the warm baritone sound of a fine cello. It was the signal that he had matched frequencies with his caller.

"All right, come in, come in,

out there. I read you," Chase said. "I read you."

The vision-screen remained dead. On audio the message came across: "State identification and purpose of travel in this sector."

The challenge had come in English, but the voice, dry and whispery, was not the voice of a human being. That much Chase could be sure of, even allowing for the inherent distortions of subetheric radio.

He said, "This is a commercial craft, Terran license. I'm a noncombatant."

"Point of departure?"

"Zenuon."

"Destination?"

"Earth."

There was a moment of silence. "What is your cargo?" his unseen interrogator demanded.

"Woven goods." There were six crates of Zenuon blankets and other such luxury-goods for Terra's millionaires in the hold. "By what authority do you interrogate me?"

"By the authority of the Free Federation of Gysl," came the immediate reply.

"This isn't Gysl territory."

"In order to preserve our neutrality we must patrol increasingly extensive reaches of space, Earthman. I apologize for any inconvenience this necessity may cause you."

Chase scowled. He hadn't expected any trouble with the Gysl people this far out. As neutrals, the Gysl people had every right to patrol their territory—but this was a healthy distance from any part of space that could logically be called Gysl territory. He began to suspect that this was some Enemy doing.

Chase said, "I'm not in Gysl territory now and I'm heading away from your planets as fast as I can."

"This is no excuse. I must inspect your ship for contraband."

CHASE'S jaws tightened. He wondered how seriously to take the Gysl statement. Gysls were, as a rule, mild, unbelligent people. And they were neutrals. Chase knew that his message was urgent; stopping for this inspection might waste valuable time. He decided to chance it. Leaving the radio on,

he activated the course computer and started to set up for renewed acceleration.

While he worked, the Gysl said, "Earthman? Earthman, are you still there? Land on the nearest planet. We are approaching the Thuuk system. Compute your course for a landing on Thuuk V."

Chase ignored the instruction and set up his ship for a quick spurt of speed. With luck he might elude the Gysl ship.

But the Gysl was stubborn. "Earthman acknowledge receipt of message! Will you land on Thuuk V?"

Chase made no answer. He jabbed down on the actuating stud and his little ship began to

The Gysl's reaction was prompt. A bolt of force speared through space and slammed against Chase's energy shields. Chase watched his shield register. The needle was almost at *overload*. Another bolt like that would split his little vessel open like a log.

And his ship was unarmed. Well, he had called the Gysl's bluff and lost. Shrugging, he countermanded his full-speed-ahead computations and let the ship slow.

"You win," he told the Gysl. "I'll land on Thuuk V. But I intend to protest this act to Terran authorities. Gysl may be neutral, but that doesn't give you the right to shoot down any ship that happens to pass within a hundred light-years of your system—"

"This inspection is necessary in order to protect our rights as neutrals," said the Gysl crisply. "I hope no further use of force will be necessary. Please make the landing at once."

Chase muttered an affirmative and turned to his charts. They were quite close to the Thuuk system now—twelve barren, airless worlds, of no use to anyone. Thuuk V was the smallest of the dozen, a planetoid rather than a full-fledged planet, no more than eight or nine hundred miles in diameter. Chase located it with his instruments and worked out a landing orbit, while the Gysl supplied him with the coordinates it wished him to use.

Landing took less than an hour. Chase brought his small ship down neatly, standing it on its tail on the nightside of Thuuk V. The Gysl ship, con-

siderably larger than his own, made its landing about a mile away.

The encounter puzzled him. It was not like the Gysl people to compel Terrans to make forced landings—at least, not this far from their own territory.

He waited. The radio flickered into life.

"We are coming to inspect your ship, Earthman."

"We?" Chase repeated. "It's a small ship, you know. I don't have room for dozens of you."

"Only two of us will come."

CHASE fidgeted, trying to tell himself that the inspection would be quick, that at worst the Gysl would discover the bottles of *Znath* and give him a mildly reproving slap on the wrist for smuggling prohibited liquor.

Two spacesuited figures were crossing the mile of naked rock that separated the Gysl ship from his own. Watching them through the televue, Chase frowned in confusion. One of the figures advancing toward him was easily recognizable as a Gysl by its size—the Gysl ra-

cial tendency was toward great height.

But the other figure could hardly be a Gysl, Chase thought. It was a short, stocky figure; no Gysl Chase had ever seen could possibly fit into so stumpy a spacesuit. The chunky figure had the characteristics of another race. Yes, Chase thought. Now the Gysl's belligerence made a bit more sense. The other figure was a Vengilan. An Enemy.

It was a neat maneuver, Chase thought. Putting a Vengilan observer aboard a Gysl ship, but letting the Gysl do the actual talking, with the Vengilan manipulating the strings in the background. That way the Enemy could take advantage of Gysl "neutrality" to inspect any Terran ship, commercial or otherwise, that passed through the region.

Chase considered possible courses of action. His ship was unarmed, but he himself had a small blaster. He toyed with the idea of firing on the approaching figures, gunning them down and making an immediate getaway.

But he discarded the idea al-

most immediately. Undoubtedly there were others aboard the Gysl ship who would take instant retribution. The Gysl vessel was bigger, faster, and bore armament. He would never get away. Better to put up with the investigation, he thought, and see what happens afterwards.

The Gysl and his stocky companion had reached the ship now. Chase heard them rap soundly on the airlock door, and he nudged the opening mechanism. The lock slid back. The compression chamber filled with air. Moments later the two visitors entered, helmets in hand. Chase had been right. The Gysl's companion was one of the Enemy.

"I hadn't expected a visit from a Vengilan," Chase said sharply.

"I was accompanying the ship on a routine observation flight," the Vengilan shot back. "In view of the state of hostilities I was invited to assist in this investigation."

"Not by me."

"The Gysl captain permitted me entry. Your wishes are irrelevant, Earthman. Let us proceed."

Chase studied his visitors. The Vengilan was an authoritative-looking one, probably a high Enemy officer. He had the characteristic stockiness of the Vengilan, a high-gravity race. His pudgy little face was lardy with gobbets of fat, out of which beady rat-like black eyes peered. Vengilans were far from pretty, with their thick bodies and coarse gray skin. They looked like ugly squashed - together caricatures of human beings.

The Gysl people, on the other hand, looked nothing at all like human beings except in their basically humanoid structure. They looked more like monsters, despite their gentle ways.

The Gysl who stood in Chase's cabin was nearly seven and a half feet in height, but his fragility of body seemed to diminish his actual stature. A row of eyes ran along the Gysl's face, disappearing in back; there were ten staring orbs, altogether. The Gysl's mouth was a sharp beak; within lay twenty fleshy tongues whose sand-papery surfaces served in place of teeth. Watching a Gysl eat

was like seeing a pack of worms ripping meat apart.

Glaring at the Vengilan, Chase said, "I must protest this entry. I hadn't bargained for a Vengilan prowling around in my ship."

"Have you anything to hide, Earthman?" The Enemy asked mockingly.

"Of course not."

"Very well. Then your objections to my presence are merely legalistic and formal—Earthman foolishness, in short. I am here. I shall aid in the inspection. Stand back, Earthman, and open your cargo hold."

CHASE yanked back the switch, and the door of the cargo hold opened.

The Vengilan pointed at Chase and said to the Gysl, "Guard him until I return."

He stepped through the open doorway into the cargo hold.

Chase turned to the towering Gysl. "Since when do you take orders from a Vengilan?"

"I take orders because I must, Earthman."

"You *must*? That's a funny way for a neutral to talk, isn't

it? Or are you people in league with the Vengilans now?"

"I do as I'm told," the Gysl said. It seemed to Chase that the row of hideous eyes reflected sadness. But it was difficult to tell. It was almost impossible for someone not a Gysl to read the expression on such a strange, alien face. Chase wondered what the real story was, here. And where the Gysl's loyalties really lay.

He said, "This is really an intolerable thing, you know. Stopping a Terran ship on the pretext that you're neutral, and then letting a Vengilan come aboard."

The Gysl's eyes closed, in sequence, one-two-three-four-five. "I could not help myself, Earthman," he said in a quiet voice.

Suddenly the Vengilan belled harshly from within, "Earthman! Come here!"

Chase smiled. "I guess he found something he didn't like."

He entered the cargo hold, with the Gysl behind him. The Vengilan had inspected with characteristic Vengilan efficiency in only a few minutes. The bundles of gay woven

cloth that comprised Chase's official cargo lay scattered all over the floor. The Vengilan had found the entrance to the hidden compartment of the cargo hold; the bulkhead was open, and he was pointing angrily at a crate of *Znath*.

"I thought your cargo was woven goods," the Vengilan snapped.

"It is."

"And these five cases?"

"Looks like some kind of liquor, doesn't it?" Chase said innocently.

"Looks like? You're smuggling *Znath*, Earthman! In violation of interstellar law! This liquor is subject to severe control. It—"

Chase cut the Vengilan off with a loud chuckle. "You talk about interstellar law, do you? Here you are boarding a Terran ship under the cheapest of tricks, and you complain because I've got some forbidden booze! You sicken me!"

The Vengilan glared. "This matter must be reported. You shall be taken to Gysl for interrogation and internment, smuggler!"

"Listen," Chase said softly.

"I'm not any enemy of yours. I'm just a guy trying to make a little money in this damned universe. I've got a wife and three kids waiting for me on Earth. Take half the *Znath* for yourself and let me get on my way, huh?"

"Attempted bribery too?"

"Call it whatever you like. Just let me get going," Chase whined.

THE Vengilan continued to prowl around the cabin as if in search of more *Znath*. Chase felt a growing sense of uneasiness. Obviously the Vengilans had achieved some measure of domination in the Gysl system, though the Gysl people still were allowed to refer to themselves as "neutrals."

But if he were ever taken back to Gysl for interrogation, he would never get free. Under the thin excuse that he had been smuggling, the Vengilans on Gysl would keep him indefinitely, hoping to drag out of him any Terran secrets he might be bearing.

In short, he had fallen into a Vengilan trap. He moistened his thin lips, looking for some

way out of the snare. Earth was still more than a week's journey distant. And his message, whatever it was, had to arrive on time.

Chase stared up at the repulsive face of the silent Gysl. "Are you going to let him do this to me?"

"I have no authority over him," the Gysl said.

"You're the commander of a Gysl spacecraft. He's just an alien observer," Chase said.

"If he wants to bring you back to Gysl for interrogation, I cannot prevent him."

"Enough chatter," the Vengilan said brusquely. "Earthman, get into your spacesuit. You'll come aboard our ship and your vessel will be grappled to ours for the trip back to Gysl."

Chase poised himself lightly on the balls of his feet. Both the Vengilan and the Gysl were armed, he saw. He debated his next move.

Under no circumstance could he let himself be taken into custody. If he could somehow overpower both of his visitors, he might be able to blast off and lose himself in space be-

fore the Gysl in the other ship were aware of what had happened. But Chase saw no way he could attack both the Vengilan and the Gysl at the same time.

"Well?" the Vengilan rasped. "You're wasting time! Into your spacesuit, Earthman!"

Chase hesitated indecisively. Better to risk everything now, he thought, than to go back to certain torture on Gysl. He started toward the spacesuit rack. But before he reached it he whirled, lunged at the Vengilan, and caught the alien around the waist before he could go for his weapon. Chase clubbed down with his fist against the sensitive spot at the back of the Vengilan's neck.

At that moment the Gysl drew his blaster. Chase had no time to move. He watched the weapon rise, saw the blue flare of deadly light—

And lived.

The Gysl had blown the Vengilan's head off.

Chase gasped in astonishment. "You—you killed him instead of me!"

"Yes," the Gysl said softly, letting his nightmare face droop

in apparent sadness. "I killed him. And if I could kill all his kind—"

"What's happened on Gysl?"

"The Vengilans are 'protecting' us," said the Gysl bitterly. "They now send out their 'observers' on every ship. They are pushing us toward war with Earth—a war we do not want. Once I was master in my own ship. Not any more. Not since this—this dead thing came aboard, I needed this excuse to strike him down."

Chase was still stunned by the Gysl's action.

"Are there other Vengilans aboard your ship?"

"No. He was the only one. When we saw your ship, he ordered me to challenge you. I obeyed him—unwillingly. Now you may return to your world, Earthman, and to your wife and family."

The wife and family had been simply a spur-of-the-moment tear-jerking invention. But Chase was not so sure that return would be so simple.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Unless your Vengilan was soft in the head, he filed a report with your home world to the

effect that he had caught a Terran. Didn't he?"

The Gysl reflected a moment. "Yes, of course. It is the standard procedure. As soon as we saw you in our viewplate, we sent word back that we were pursuing a Terran ship."

Chase nodded abstractedly. Then, seeming to forget the matter entirely, he looked down at the Vengilan. His head was a shattered ruin.

"That gun of yours is quite an instrument," the Earthman said admiringly. "Mind if I get a look at it? I'm interested in guns—hobby of mine."

He took the weapon from the Gysl, examined it for an instant, and flipped it forward, snout first. Smiling coldly, Chase said, "I'm sorry to have to do this to you, friend. You saved my life just then, and I appreciate it. But I can't let sentiment interfere with my job."

"Why are you pointing the gun at me?" the Gysl asked in bewilderment.

"Get on the communicator," Chase ordered. "Tell your entire crew to suit up and come over here immediately. How many are there?"

"Six others."

"Okay. I want all six out of the ship and over here right away. Order them to make it fast. And I happen to understand the Gysl language, so don't try to give any phony messages."

That much was a bare-faced lie; Chase knew about eight words in Gysl, four of them profane and the rest obscene. But this was a risk he had to take. Keeping the Gysl commander at gunpoint, he opened the communicator channel.

"Speak," he ordered.

The Gysl nodded tensely, put his mouth near the microphone, and rattled off half a dozen sentences. Chase watched, fascinated by the writhing of the twenty tongues inside the Gysl's mouth.

Finally the Gysl looked up. "They are coming. But why do you do this?"

"I need your ship," Chase said. "The report has already gone out that there's a Terran ship trying to slip through this region. If I blast off in my own ship again, I'll only be caught by another scout—and next

time I may not be so lucky. In your ship no one will bother me. Understand? I *have* to get to Earth."

"But—I killed the Vengilan so you could escape—and now you steal my ship?"

"Worse than that," Chase said. "I'm going to have to kill you, too."

The Gysl started to speak; Chase cut him off with one quick slash of the energy-beam through his middle. The weird alien face registered a comprehensible emotion for the first time: the alien's expression was incontrovertibly that of dismay, shock, betrayal.

"Sorry," Chase said as the Gysl slumped to the floor next to the dead Vengilan. "You don't know how it hurts me to have to do this."

He suited up hastily, and, opening the airlock, waited outside the ship for the rest of the Gysl crew. He saw them coming, bounding gawkily across the barren plain, six tall ungainly creatures. Chase wondered what the range on the gun was. He decided to wait until they were no more than twenty-five yards away.

It was a heel's act, Chase thought broodingly. Here they came, so trustingly, and in a moment they would all be dead.

He fired.

The blaster beam raked across the six of them in one fiery burst, ripping open their spacesuits. Their atmosphere fled outward into the emptiness.

They died instantly.

Chase stood still for an instant, staring at the weapon in his hand, feeling a sadness deeper than he had ever known before in his life.

At least, he thought, he had been charitable. He had given them a quick death. It was better than simply leaving them here to starve.

MOVING rapidly now, for he had to make up for lost time, Chase dragged the six Gysl corpses into his own ship, setting them down one by one next to the other two bodies in the control cabin. The place looked like a slaughterhouse, he thought.

He left the little ship without bothering to shut the airlock. He realized he was abandoning all the *Znath*, but that was only

momentary cause for regret; the stuff was supposed to corrode the brain cells, and he was better off without it. Especially now, when he was more likely than ever to become a drinking man.

He crossed the mile that separated the two ships. With the gravity of Thuuk V as low as it was, the trip took him hardly any time; he travelled in huge leaps.

The Gysl had left the outer lock of their ship open. Blaster drawn, in case any of the Gysl had decided to remain behind, Chase entered the ship.

It was empty. Silent as a tomb. He closed the airlock and prowled around.

There were the sleeping-quarters of the Gysl—Spartan accommodations, nothing more than a sleeping-bunk. The Gysl captain had somewhat better accommodations, while the Venigilan rated a cabin all to himself.

Chase shrugged out of his spacesuit, racked it, and entered the control room. All spaceships worked on more or less the same principles; he didn't doubt that he would be

able to operate the Gysl ship after a few moments of studying the control panel.

He was right. The differences were trifling.

Chase sat at the controls for a long while without blasting off. He thought about the seven Gysl he had murdered. *Murdered*. Ugly word. But true.

Perhaps they had been family men. Even Gysl, ugly monsters that they were, had families. He wondered if he had just created seven brand new widows.

No help for it, he told himself. The message had to get through. Earth's safety was more important than the happiness of seven Gysl wives.

There had been no alternative for him. An alarm would be out for a small Terran ship; his only hope of reaching Earth without interception lay in switching ships. But at the same time he could not allow the seven Gysl to leave this planet in his own ship, for they would be intercepted, and the story of the switch was bound to come out that way.

There wasn't any choice, he told himself. He had to leave

Thuk V in the Gysl ship, and the Gysl had to remain marooned here. Better dead than slowly starving, he had decided. And they were dead.

Chase studied the control console of the Gysl ship's armaments for a while. There was a long-range screen; he turned it on, fixed his own little ship in the crosshairs, and depressed the firing stud. A tongue of flame crept out across the airless surface of the planet, enveloping the small ship.

It blazed brightly; when Chase turned off the energy gun, only a blackened pile of charred ashes remained. It had been a hero's pyre, he thought. Now no one would ever find the elusive Terran ship and the missing seven Gysl.

"So long," he said out loud, thinking of the Gysl who had saved him—the noble monster who had struck a small blow for freedom's sake, and then

had uncomprehendingly given his life in the same cause. Chase set up his blastoff computations and his ship sprang skyward.

He finished the journey unmolested, in the Gysl ship. Landing at London, he was taken to the Defense Ministry, where he was relieved of his message.

The message had been a vital one. Chase was given a hero's welcome—he had brought the word, and he had done well.

"Your name will ring in history's halls forever," they told him as they pinned the medals on him.

Chase tried to smile and look heroic. But he couldn't quite succeed. He knew he would never forget the seven alien monsters who had given their lives, without knowing why, so the message could get through.

THE END
