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# YELLOW STREAK HERO

By HARLAN ELLISON

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*All your life you've crouched, waiting, in the path of impending disaster. That has been your job—what you were trained for. But you can't help visualizing its arrival—prophecyng what form it will take. So how could you be blamed for not recognizing it on arrival?*

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**D**ARKNESS seeped in around the little quonset. It oozed out of the deeps of space and swirled around Ferreno's home. The automatic scanners turned and turned, whispering quietly, their message of wariness unconsciously reassuring the old man.

He bent over and plucked momentarily at a bit of lint on the carpet. It was the only speck of foreign matter on the rug, reflecting the old man's perpetual cleanliness and almost fanatical neatness.

The racks of book-spools were all binding-to-binding, set flush with the lip of the shelves; the bed was made with a military tightness that allowed a coin to bounce high three times; the walls

were free of fingerprints—dusted and wiped clean twice a day; there was no speck of lint or dust on anything in the one room quonset.

When Ferreno had flicked the single bit of matter from his fingers, into the incinerator, the place was immaculate.

It reflected twenty-four years of watching, waiting, and living alone. Living alone on the edge of Forever, waiting for something that might never come. Tending blind, dumb machines that could say *Something is out here*, but also said, *We don't know what it is*.

Ferreno returned to his pneumo-chair, sank heavily into it, and blinked, his deep-set gray eyes seeking into the furthest rounded corner of



The age-old symbol of eternal dread was fast becoming real.

the quonset's ceiling. His eyes seemed to be looking for something. But there was nothing there he did not already know. Far too well.

He had been on this asteroid, this spot lost in the darkness, for twenty-four years. In that time, nothing had happened.

There had been no warmth, no women, no feeling, and only a brief flurry of emotion for almost twenty of those twenty-four years.

Ferreno had been a young man when they had set him down on The Stone. They had pointed out there and said to him:

"Beyond the farthest spot you can see, there's an island universe. In that island universe there's an enemy, Ferreno. One day he'll become tired of his home and come after yours.

"You're here to watch for him."

And they had gone before he could ask them.

Ask them: who *were* the enemy? Where would they come from, and why was he here, alone, to stop them? What could he do if they came? What were the huge, silent machines that bulked monstrous behind the little quonset? Would he ever go home again?

All he had known was the intricate dialing process for the inverspace communicators. The tricky-fingered method of sending a coded response half across the galaxy to a waiting Mark LXXXII brain—waiting only for his frantic pulsing.

He had known only that. The dialing process and the fact that he was to watch. Watch for he-knew-not-what!

There at first he had thought he would go out of his mind. It had been the monotony. Monotony intensified to a frightening degree. The ordeal of watching, watching, watching. Sleeping, eating from the self-replenishing supply of protofoods in the greentank, reading, sleeping again, re-reading the book-spools till their casings crackled, snapped, and lost panes. Then the re-binding—and re-re-reading. The horror of knowing every passage of a book by heart.

He could recite from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, till the very words lost meaning, sounded strange and unbelievable in his ears.

First had come living in

filth and throwing things against the curving walls and ceilings. Things designed to give, and bounce—but not to break. Walls designed to absorb the impact of a flung drink-ball or a smashed fist. Then had come the extreme neatness, then a moderation, and finally back to the neat, prissy fastidiousness of an old man who wants to know where everything is at any time.

No women. That had been a constant horror for the longest time. A mounting pain in his groin and belly, that had wakened him during the arbitrary night, swimming in his own sweat, his mouth and body aching. He had gotten over it slowly. He had even attempted emasculation. None of it had worked, of course, and it had only passed away with his youth.

He had taken to talking to himself. And answering himself. Not madness, just the fear that the ability to speak might be lost.

Madness had descended many times during the early years. The blind, clawing urgency to get out! Get out into the airless vastness of The Stone. At least to die, to end this nowhere existence.

But they had constructed

the quonset without a door. The plasteel-sealed slit his deliverers had gone out, had been closed irrevocably behind them, and there *was* no way out.

Madness had come often.

But they had picked him well. He clung to his sanity, for he knew it was his only escape. He knew it would be a far more horrible thing to end out his days in this quonset a helpless maniac, than to remain sane.

He swung back over the line and soon grew content with his world in a shell. He waited, for there was nothing else he could do; and in his waiting a contentment grew out of frantic restlessness. He began to think of it as a jail, then as a coffin, then as the ultimate black of the Final Hole. He would wake in the arbitrary night, choking, his throat constricted, his hands warped into claws that crooked themselves into the foam rubber of the sleeping couch with fierceness and desperation.

The time was spent. A moment after it had passed, he could not tell *how* it had been spent. His life became dust-dry and at times he could hardly tell he *was* living. Had it not been for the protected, automatic calendar, he would

not have known the years were passing.

And ever, ever, ever—the huge, dull, sleeping eye of the warning buzzer. Staring back at him, veiled, from the ceiling.

It was hooked up with the scanners. The scanners that hulked behind the quonset. The scanners in turn were hooked up to the net of tight inverspace rays that interlocked each other out to the farthest horizon Ferreno might ever know.

And the net, in turn, joined at stop-gap junctions with the doggie-guards, also waiting, watching with dumb metal and plastic minds for that implacable alien enemy that might someday come.

They had known the enemy would come, for they had found the remnants of those the enemy had destroyed. Remnants of magnificent and powerful cultures, ground to microscopic dust by the heel of a terrifying invader.

They could not chance roaming the universe with those Others somewhere. Somewhere . . . waiting. They had formed the inverspace net, joining it with the doggie-guards. And they had hooked the system in with the scanners; and they had wired the scanners to the big, dull

eye in the ceiling of the quonset.

Then they had set Ferreno to watching it.

At first Ferreno had watched the thing constantly. Waiting for it to make the disruptive noise he was certain it would emit. Breaking the perpetual silence of his bubble. He waited for the bloodiness of its blink to warp fantastic shadows across the room and furniture. He even spent five months deciding what shape those shadows would take, when they came.

Then he entered the period of nervousness. Jumping for no reason at all, to stare at the eye. The hallucinations: it was blinking, it was ringing in his ears. The sleeplessness: it might go off and he would not hear it.

Then as time progressed, he grew unaware of it, forgot it existed for long periods. Till it had finally come to the knowledge that it was there; a dim thing, an unremembered thing, as much a part of him as his own ears, his own eyes. He had nudged it to the back of his mind—but it was always there.

Always there, always waiting, always on the verge of disruption.

Ferreno never forgot why he was there. He never forgot the reason they had come for him. *The day they had come for him.*

The evening had been pale and laden with sound. The flits clacking through the air above the city, the crickets in the grass, the noise of the tri-vi from the front room of the house.

He had been sitting on the front porch, arms tight about his girl, on a creaking porch glider that smacked the wall every time they rocked back too far. He remembered the taste of the sweet-acidy lemonade in his stomach as the three men resolved out of the gloom. With no warning at all they appeared.

They had stepped onto the porch.

"Are you Charles Jackson Ferreno, age nineteen, brown hair, brown eyes, five-foot-

ten, 158 pounds, scar on right inner wrist?"

"Y-yes . . . why?" he had stammered.

The intrusion of these strangers on a thing as private as his love-making had caused him to falter.

Then they had grabbed him.

"What are you doing? Get your hands off him!" Marie had screamed.

They had flashed an illuminated card at her, and she had subsided to terrified silence before their authority. Then they had taken him, howling, into a flit—black and silent—and whirled him off to the plasteel block in the Nevada desert that had been Central Space Service Headquarters.

They had hypno-conditioned him to operate the inverse-space communicators. A task he could not have learned in

two hundred years—involving the billion alternate dialing choices—had they not planted it mechanically.

Then they had prepared him for the ship.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why have you picked me!” he had screamed at them, fighting the lacing-up of the pressure suit.

They had told him. The Mark LXXXII. He had been chosen best out of forty-seven thousand punched cards whipped through its metal vitals. Best by selection. An infallible machine had said he was the least susceptible to madness, inefficiency, failure. He was the best, and the Service needed him.

Then, the ship.

The nose of the beast pointed straight up into a cloudless sky, blue and unfiled as the best he had ever known. Then a rumble, and a scream, and the pressure as it raced into space. And the almost imperceptible wrenching as the ship slipped scud-wise through inver-space. The travel through the milky pinkness of that not-space. Then the gut-pulling again, and *there!* off to the right through the port—that bleak little asteroid with its quonset blemish.

When they had set him down and told him about the enemy, he had screamed at them, but they had pushed him back into the bubble, sealed the airport-lock, and gone back to the ship.

They had left The Stone, then. Rushing up till they had popped out of sight around a bend in space.

His hands had been bloodied, beating against the resilient plasteel of the airport-lock and vista windows.

He never forgot why he was there.

He tried to conjure up the enemy. Were they horrible slug-like creatures from some dark star, spreading a ring of viscous, poisonous fluid inside Earth's atmosphere; were they tentacled spider-men who drank blood; were they perhaps quiet, well-mannered beings who would sublimate all of man's drives and ambitions; were they...

He went on and on, till it did not matter in the slightest to him. Then he forgot time. But he remembered he was here to watch. To watch and wait. A sentinel at the gate of the Forever, waiting for an unknown enemy that might streak out of nowhere bound for Earth and destruction. Or that might have died



out millenia before—leaving him here on a worthless assignment, doomed to an empty life.

He began the hate. The hate of the men who had consigned him to this living death. He hated the men who had brought him here in their ship. He hated the men who had conceived the idea of a sentinel. He hated the Mark computer that had said:

“Get Charles Jackson Ferreno *only!*”

He hated them all. But most of all he hated the alien enemy. The implacable enemy that had thrown fear into the hearts of the men.

Ferreno hated them all with a bitter intensity verging on madness, itself. Then, the obsession passed. Even that passed.

Now he was an old man. His hands and face and neck wrinkled with the skin-folding of age. His eyes had sunk back under ridges of flesh, his eyebrows white as the stars. His hair loose and uncombed, trimmed raggedly by an ultra-safe shaving device he had not been able to corrupt for suicide. A beard of unkempt and foul proportions. A body slumped into a position that fitted his pneumo-chair exactly.

Thoughts played leap-frog with themselves. Ferreno was thinking. For the first time in eight years—since the last hallucination had passed—actually thinking. He sat humped into the pneumo-chair that had long-ago formed itself permanently to his posture. The muted strains of some long-since over-familiarized piece of taped music humming above him. Was the horrible repetition Vivaldi's *Gloria Mass* or a snatch of Monteverdi? He fumbled in the back of his mind, in the recess this music had lived for so long—consigned there by horrible repetition.

His thoughts veered before he found the answer. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, but the watching.

Beads of perspiration sprang out, dotting his upper lip and the receding arcs of sparse hair at his temples.

*What if they never came?*

What if they had gone already and through some failure of the mechanisms he had missed them? Even the below-hearing persistence of the revolving scanners' workings was not assurance enough. For the first time in many years he was hearing the scanners again, and did they sound right? Didn't...

they . . . sound . . . a . . . bit . . . off?

*They didn't sound right!*  
My God, all these years and now they weren't working! He had no way of repairing them, no way of getting out of here, he was doomed to lie here till he died—his purpose gone! Oh, my God! All these years here nowhere and my youth gone and they've stopped running and no-good damned things failing now and the aliens've slipped through and Earth's gone and I'm no good here and it's all for nothing and Marie and everything . . .

*Ferreno! Good God, man! Stop yourself!*

He grabbed control of himself abruptly, lurchingly. The machines were perfect. They worked on the basic substance of inerspace. They *couldn't* go wrong, once set running on the pattern.

But the uselessness of it all remained.

His head fell into his shaking hands. He felt tears bubbling behind his eyes. What could one puny man do here, away from all and everyone? They had told him more than one man would be dangerous. They would kill each other out of sheer boredom. The same for a man and a wom-

an. Only one man could remain in possession of his senses, to tickle out the intricate warning on the inerspace communicator.

He recalled again what they had said about relief.

There could be none. Once sealed in, a man had begun the fight with himself. If they took him out and put in another man, they were upping the chances of a miscalculation—and a failure. By picking the very best man mechanically, they were putting all their eggs in one basket—but they were cutting risk to the bone.

He recalled again what they had said about a machine in his place.

Impossible. A robot brain, equipped to perform that remarkable task of sorting the warning factors, and recording it on the inerspace communicators—including any possible ramifications that might crop up in fifty years—would have to be fantastically large.

It would have had to be five hundred miles long by three hundred wide. With tapes and condensers and tranversistors and punch-checks that, if laid end to end, would have reached halfway from The Stone to Earth.

He knew he was necessary,

which had been one of the things that had somehow stopped him from finding a way to wreck himself or the whole quonset during those twenty-four years.

Yet, it still seemed so worthless, so helpless, so unnecessary. He didn't know, but he was certain the quonset bubble would inform them if he died or was helpless. Then they would try again.

He was necessary, *if . . .*

*If the enemy was coming. If the enemy hadn't already passed him by. If the enemy hadn't died long ago. If, if, if!*

He felt the madness waking again, like some horrible monster of the mind.

He pressed it back with cool argument.

He knew, deep inside himself, that he was a symbol. A gesture of desperation. A gesture of survival to the peoples of Earth. They wanted to live. But did they have to sacrifice a man for their survival.

He could not come to an answer within himself.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Perhaps not. Either way, it just happened he had been the man.

Here at this junction of

the galaxies; in this spot of most importance; here he was the key to a battle that must someday be fought.

But what if he was wasted? What if they never came? What if there was no enemy at all? Only supposition by the learned ones. Tampering with the soul and life of a human being!

God! The horror of the thought! What if . . .

A soft buzz accompanied the steady ruby glow from the eye in the ceiling.

Ferreno stared, open-mouthed. He could not look up at the eye itself. He stared at the crimson film that covered the walls and floor of the quonset. This was the time he had waited twenty-four years to come!

Was this it? No strident noises, no flickering urgency of the red light. Only a steady glow and a soft buzz.

And at the same time he knew that this was far more effective. It had prevented his death from heart attack.

Then he tried to move. Tried to finger the forty-three keys of the inerspace communicator on the underarm of the pneumo-chair. Tried to translate the message the way it had been impressed subconsciously in his mind, in a way he could

never have done consciously.

He had frozen in his seat.

He couldn't move. His hands would not respond to the frantic orders of his brain. The keys lay silent under the chair arm, the warning unsent. He was totally incapacitated. What if this was a dud? What if the machines were breaking down from the constant twenty-four years of use? Twenty-four years—and how many men before him? What if this was merely another hallucination? What if he was going insane at last?

He couldn't take the chance. His mind blocked him off. The fear was there. He couldn't be wrong, and send the warning now!

Then he saw it, and he knew it was not a dud.

Far out in the ever-dark dark of the space beyond The Stone, he could see a spreading point of light piercing the ebony of the void. And he knew. A calmness covered him.

Now he knew it had not been waste. This was the culmination of all the years of waiting. The privation, the hunger of loneliness, the torture of boredom, all of it. It was worth suffering all that.

He reached under, and closed his eyes, letting his hypno-training take over. His fingers flickered momentarily over the forty-three keys.

That done, he settled back, letting his thoughts rest on the calmed surface of his mind. He watched the spreading points of light in the vista window, knowing it was an armada advancing without pause on Earth.

He was content. He would die soon, and his job was finished. It was worth all the years without. Without anything good he would have known on Earth. But it was worth all of it. The struggle for life was coming to his people.

His night vigil was finally ended.

The enemy was coming at last.

**THE END**