

DISCORD IN SCARLET

XTL sprawled moveless on the bosom of endless night. Time dragged drearily toward infinity, and space was dark. Unutterably dark! The horrible pitch-blackness of intergalactic immensity! Across the miles and the years, vague patches of light gleamed coldly at him, whole galaxies of blazing stars shrunk by incredible distance to shining swirls of mist.

Life was out there, spawning on the myriad planets that whirled eternally around the myriad suns. And life had once crawled out of the primeval mud of ancient Glor—before cosmic explosion destroyed a mighty race and flung his—Xtl's—body out into the deeps of space, the prey of chance.

His brain pulsed on and on in the same old, old cycle of thought—thinking: one chance in decillions that his body would ever come near a galactic system. One chance in infinity itself that he fall on a planet and find a precious *guul*. And never, never a hope that his race would live again.

A billion times that thought had pounded to its dreary conclusion in his brain, until it was a part of him, until it was like a picture unrolling before his eyes—it and those remote wisps of shiningness out there in that blackness. And that picture was more real than the reality. He

had no consciousness of the spaceship, until he touched the metal.

Hard, hardness—something material! The vague sense perception fumbled into his dulled brain, bringing a living pain—like a disused muscle, briefly, agonizingly brought into action.

The thought slumped. His brain slid back into its sleep of ages, seeing again the old picture of hopelessness and the shiningness in the black. The very idea of hardness became a dream that faded. Some remote corner of his mind, curiously alert, watched it fade, watched the shadows creep with reaching, enveloping folds of lightlessness, striving to re-engulf the dim consciousness that had flashed into such an anguish of ephemeral existence.

And then, once more, his groping fingers sent that dull pulse of awareness tapping its uncertain message to his sodden, hopeless brain.

His elongated body convulsed in senseless movement, four arms lashed out, four legs jackknifed with blind, unreasoning strength. There was a distinct sense of a blow and of a pushing away from the hard matter.

His dazed, staring eyes, his stultified vision galvanized into life; and he saw that, in the contorted fury of his movements, he had pushed himself away from the surface of a vast, round, dark-bodied metal monster, studded with row on row of glaring lights, like diamonds. The spaceship floated there in the velvet darkness, glowing like an immense jewel, quiescent but alive, enormously, vitally alive, bringing nostalgic and vivid suggestion of a thousand far-flung planets, and of an indomitable, boisterous life that had reached for the stars and grasped them. Bringing—hope!

THE TORPID tenor of his thoughts exploded into chaos. His mind, grooved through the uncounted ages to ultimate despair, soared up, up, insanely. Life surged from the bottom point of static to the swirling, irresistible height of dynamism, that jarred every atom of his scarlet, cylindrical body and his round, vicious head. His legs and arms glistened like tongues of living fire, as they twisted and writhed in the blaze of light from those dazzling portholes. His

mouth, a gash in the center of his hideous head, slavered a white frost that floated away in little frozen globules.

His brain couldn't hold the flame of that terrific hope. His mind kept dissolving, blurring. Through that blur, he saw a thick vein of light form a circular bulge in the metallic surface of the ship. The bulge became a huge door that rotated open and tilted to one side. A flood of brilliance spilled out the great opening, followed by a dozen two-legged beings in transparent metal armor, dragging great floating machines.

Swiftly, the machines were concentrated around a dark projection on the ship's surface. Intolerable light flared up as what was obviously repair work proceeded at an alarming pace.

He was no longer falling away from the ship. The faint pressure of gravitational pull was drawing him down again—so slowly. Frantically, he adjusted his atomic structure to the fullest measure of attraction. But even his poorly responding brain could see that he would never make it.

The work was finished. The incandescent glare of atomic welders died to spluttering darkness. Machines were unclamped, floated toward the opening of the ship, down into it and out of sight. The two-legged beings scrambled after them. The vast, curved plain of metal was suddenly as deserted and lifeless as space itself.

Terror struck into Xtl. He'd have to fight, have to get there somehow. He couldn't let them get away now, when the whole universe was in his grasp—twenty-five short yards away. His leaching arms reached out stupidly, as if he would hold the ship by sheer fury of need. His brain ached with a slow, rhythmical hurt. His mind spun toward a black, bottomless pit—then poised just before the final plunge.

The great door was slowing in its swift rotation. A solitary being squeezed through the ring of light and ran to the dark projection, just repaired. He picked up an instrument that gleamed weirdly, a tool of some kind forgotten, and started back toward the partly open lock.

He stopped. In the glow from the portholes, Xtl could see the other's face through the transparent armor. The face stared up at him, eyes wide, mouth open. Then the

mouth moved rapidly, opening and shutting, apparently a form of communication with the others.

A moment later the door was rotating again, opening wide. A group of the beings came out, two of them mounted on the top of a large, metal-barred cage, steering it under power. He was to be captured.

Oddly, his brain felt no sense of lift, no soaring hope, none of that mind-inflaming ecstasy. It was as if a drug was dragging him down, down, into a black night of fatigue. Appalled, he fought off the enveloping stupor. He must hold to his senses. His race, that had attained the very threshold of ultimate knowledge, must live again.

THE VOICE, a strained, unrecognizable voice, came to Commander Morton through the communicators in his transparent spacesuit: "How in the name of all the hells can anything live in intergalactic space?"

It seemed to the commander that the question made the little group of men crowd closer together. The proximity of the others made them feel easier. Then they suddenly grew aware of the impalpable yet *alive* weight of the inconceivable night that coiled about them, pressing down to the very blazing portholes.

For the first time in years, the immensity of that night squeezed icily into Morton's consciousness. Long familiarity had bred indifference into his very bones—but now, the incredible vastness of that blackness reaching a billion trillion years beyond the farthest frontiers of man stabbed into his mind, and brought an almost dismaying awareness. His deep voice, clattering into the communicators, split that scared silence like some harsh noise, startled him:

"Gunlie Lester, here's something for your astronomical-mathematical brain. Will you please give us the ratio of the *Beagle* at the exact point in space where that thing was floating? Take a few hours to work it out."

The astronomer replied immediately: "I don't have to think about it. The chance is unstatable in human arithmetic. It can't happen, mathematically speaking. Here we are, a shipload of human beings, stopping for repairs halfway between two galaxies—the first time we've ever made a trip outside of our own galaxy. Here we are, I say, a

tiny point intersecting without prearrangement exactly the path of another, tinier point. Impossible, unless space is saturated with such—creatures!"

"I hope not," another man shuddered. "We ought to turn a mobile unit on anything that looks like that, on general principles."

The shudder seemed to run along the communicators. Commander Morton shook his great, lean body as if consciously trying to throw off the chill of it. His eyes on the maneuvering cage above, he said:

"A regular blood-red devil spewed out of some fantastic nightmare; ugly as sin—and probably as harmless as our beautiful pussy last year was deadly. Smith, what do you think?"

The cadaverous-faced biologist said in his cold, logical voice: "This thing has arms and legs, a purely planetary evolution. If it is intelligent it will begin to react to environment the moment it is inside the cage. It may be a venerable old sage, meditating in the silence of distractionless space. Or it may be a young murderer, condemned to eternal exile, consumed with desire to sneak back home and resume the life he lived."

"I wish Korita had come out with us," said Pennons, the chief engineer, in his quiet, practical voice. "Korita's historical analysis of pussy last year gave us an advance idea of what we had to face and—"

"KORITA speaking, Mr. Pennons," came the meticulously clear voice of the Japanese archaeologist on the communicators. "Like many of the others, I have been listening to what is happening as a welcome break in this, the longest journey the spaceship *Beagle* has ever undertaken. But I am afraid analysis of the creature would be dangerous at this factless stage. In the case of pussy, we had the barren, foodless planet on which we lived, and the architectural realities of his crumbled city.

"Here we have a creature living in space a million years from the nearest planet, apparently without food, and without means of spatial locomotion. I suggest you make certain that you get him into the cage, and then study him—every action, every reaction. Take pictures of his internal organs working in the vacuum of space. Find

out every possible thing about him, so that we shall know what we have aboard as soon as possible. Now, when we are fully staffed again and heading for a new galaxy for the first time in the history of man, we cannot afford to have anything go wrong, or anybody killed before we reach there. Thank you."

"And that," said Morton, "is sense. You've got your fluorite camera, Smith?"

"Attached to my suit," Smith acknowledged.

Morton who knew the capabilities of the mournful-looking biologist turned his attention back to the cage fifty feet away. He said in his deep, resonant voice: "Open the door as wide as possible, and drop over him. Don't let his hands grab the bars."

"Just a minute!" a guttural voice broke in. Morton turned questioningly to the big, plump German physicist. Von Grossen continued: "Let us not rush this capture, Commander Morton. It is true that I was not aboard last year when you had your encounter with the creature you persist in calling pussy. But when you returned to the base planet before embarking on the present voyage, the story you told to the world was not reassuring, not to me, anyway."

His hard, gray-dark face stared grimly at the others: "It is true that I can see no real objection to capturing this creature in a cage. But it happens that I am replacing a man who was killed by this—pussy. Therefore I speak for him when I say: Such a thing must never happen again."

Morton frowned, his face lined with doubt. "You put me in a spot, von Grossen. As human beings, we must take every possible precaution. As scientists, however, all is grist for our mill; everything must be investigated. There can be no thought of shunning danger before we even know it to be danger. If this voyage is to be ruled by fear, we might as well head for home now."

"Fear is not what I had in mind," said the physicist quietly. "But I believe in counting ten before acting."

Morton asked. "Any other objections?"

He felt oddly annoyed that there were none.

XTL waited. His thoughts kept breaking up into little

pieces of light and lightless—a chain of dazzle and dark—that somehow connected up with all the things he had ever known or thought. Visions of a long-dead planet trickled into his consciousness bringing a vague conceit—and a contempt of these creatures who thought to capture him.

Why, he could remember a time when his race had had spaceships a hundred times the size of this machine that swam below him. That was before they had dispensed completely with space travel, and just lived a quiet homey life building beauty from natural forces.

He watched, as the cage was driven toward him unerringly. There was nothing he could do, even had he wanted to. The gaping mouth of the large, metal-barred construction closed over him and snapped shut the moment he was inside.

Xtl clawed at the nearest bar, caught hold with grim strength. He clung there an instant, sick and dizzy with awful reaction. Safe! His mind expanded with all the violence of an exploding force. Free electrons discharged in dizzying swarms from the chaos of the spinning atom systems inside his brain and body, frantically seeking union with the other systems. He was safe—safe after quadrillions of years of sick despair, and on a material body with unlimited power to take him where he would to go. Safe when there was still time to carry out his sacred purpose. Or was he safe?

The cage was dropping toward the surface of the ship. His eyes became gleaming pools of caution, as they studied the men below. It was only too evident that he was to be examined. With a tremendous effort, stung by fear, he tried to push the clinging dullness from his brain, fought for alertness. An examination of him now would reveal his purpose, expose the precious objects concealed within his breast; and that must not be.

His steely-bright eyes flicked in anxious dismay over the dozen figures in transparent armor. Then his mind calmed. They were inferior creatures, obviously! Puny foes before his own remarkable power. Their very need of spacesuits proved their inability to adapt themselves to environment, proved they existed on a low plane of evolution. Yet he must not underestimate them. Here

were keen brains, capable of creating and using mighty machines.

Each of the beings had weapons in holster at the side of his space armor—weapons with sparkling, translucent handles. He had noticed the same weapons in the holsters of the men at the top of the cage. That, then, would be his method if any of these creatures flashed a camera on him.

As the cage dropped into the belt of undiffused blackness between two portholes, Smith stepped forward with his camera—and Xtl jerked himself with effortless ease up the bars to the ceiling of the cage. The gash of his mouth in the center of his round, smooth head was split in a silent snarl of fury at the unutterable bad luck that was forcing this move upon him. His vision snapped full on; and now he could see blurrily through the hard metal of the ceiling.

One arm, with its eight wirelike fingers, lashed out with indescribable swiftness at the ceiling, *through* it, and then he had a gun from the holster of one of the men.

He did not attempt to readjust its atomic structure as he had adjusted his arm. It was important that they should not guess that it was he who fired the gun. Straining in his awkward position, he aimed the weapon straight at Smith and the little group of men behind him—released the flaming power.

There was a flare of incandescent violence that blotted the men from view. A swirl of dazzling light coruscated virulently across the surface of the ship. And there was another light, too. A blue sparkle that told of automatic defense screens driving out from the armored suits of the men.

In one continuous movement, Xtl released the gun, withdrew his hand; and, by the act, pushed himself to the floor. His immediate fear was gone. No sensitive camera film could have lived through the blaze of penetrating energy. And what was overwhelmingly more important—the gun was no good against himself. Nothing but a simple affair which employed the method of transmutation of one element to another, the process releasing one or two electrons from each atom system. It

would require a dozen such guns to do damage to his body.

THE GROUP of men stood quite still; and Morton knew they were fighting, as he was, the blindness that lingered from the spray of violent light. Slowly, his eyes became adjusted; and then he could see again the curved metal on which he stood, and beyond that the brief, barren crest of the ship and the limitless miles of lightless, heatless space—dark, fathomless, unthinkable gulfs. There too, a blur among the blurs of shadows, stood the cage.

"I'm sorry, commander," one of the men on the cage apologized. "The ato-gun must have fallen out of my belt, and discharged."

"Impossible!" Smith's voice came to Morton, low and tense. "In this gravitation, it would take several minutes to fall from the holster, and it wouldn't discharge in any event from such a slight jar of landing."

"Maybe I knocked against it, sir, without noticing."

"Maybe!" Smith seemed to yield grudgingly to the explanation. "But I could almost swear that, just before the flare of light dazzled me, the creature moved. I admit it was too black to see more than the vaguest blur, but—"

"Smith," Morton said sharply, "what are you trying to prove?"

He saw the long-faced biologist hunch his narrow shoulders, as if pulling himself together. The biologist mumbled: "When you put it like that, I don't know. The truth is, I suppose, that I've never gotten over the way I insisted on keeping pussy alive, with such desperately tragic results. I suspect everything now, and—"

Morton stared in surprise. It was hard to realize that it was really Smith speaking—the scientist who, it had seemed sometimes in the past, was ready to sacrifice his own life and everybody else's if it meant adding a new, important fact to the science of biology. Morton found his voice at last:

"You were perfectly right in what you did! Until we realized the truth, you expressed the majority mind of this ship's company. The development of the situation in the case of pussy changed our opinion as well as your

own, but it did not change our method of working by evidence alone. I say that we should continue to make such logic the basis of our work."

"Right. And beg your pardon, chief!" Smith was brisk-voiced again. "Crane, turn the cage light on, and let's see what we've got here."

To MORTON, the silence that followed seemed like a sudden, oppressive weight, as the blaze of light showered down on Xtl crouching at the bottom of the cage. The almost metallic sheen of the cylindrical body, the eyes like coals of fire, the wirelike fingers and toes, the scarlet hideousness of it startled even these men who were accustomed to alien forms of life. He broke the spell of horror, half-breathlessly:

"He's probably very handsome—to himself!"

"If life is evolution," said Smith in a stiff voice, "and nothing evolves except for use, how can a creature living in space have highly developed legs and arms? Its insides should be interesting. But now—my camera's useless! That flare of energy would have the effect of tinting the electrified lens, and of course the film's ruined. Shall I get another?"

"N-n-no-o!" Morton's clean-cut, handsome face grew dark with a frown. "We've wasted a lot of time here; and after all, we can re-create vacuum of space conditions inside the ship's laboratory, and be traveling at top acceleration while we're doing it."

"Just a minute!" Von Grossen, the plump but hard-boiled physicist, spoke: "Let's get this straight. The *Beagle* is going to another galaxy on an exploration voyage—the first trip of the kind. Our business is to study life in this new system, but we're not taking any specimens, only pictures and notes—studies of the creatures in their various environments. If we're all so nervous about this thing, why are we taking it aboard?"

"Because"—Smith beat Morton to the reply—"we're not tied down to pictures and notes. There will, however, be millions of forms of life on every planet, and we shall be forced to the barest kind of record in most cases. This monster is different. In our fears we have almost forgotten that the existence of a creature capable of

living in space is the most extraordinary thing we've ever run across. Even pussy, who could live without air, needed warmth of a kind, and would have found the absolute cold of space intolerable. If, as we suspect, this creature's natural habitat is not space, then we must find out why and how he came to be where he is. Speaking as a biologist—"

"I see," interrupted Morton dryly, "that Smith is himself again." He directed a command at the men on the cage. "Take that monster inside, and put a wall of force around the cage. That should satisfy even the most cautious."

Xtl felt the faint throb of the motors of the cage. He saw the bars move, then grew conscious of a sharp, pleasant tingling sensation, brief physical activity within his body that stopped the workings of his mind for a bare second. Before he could think, there was the cage floor rising above him—and he was lying on the hard surface of the spaceship's outer shell.

With a snarl of black dismay that almost cut his face in two, he realized the truth. He had forgotten to re-adjust the atoms in his body after firing the gun. And now he had fallen through!

"Good Heaven!" Morton bellowed.

A scarlet streak of elongated body, a nightmare shadow in that braid of shadow and light, Xtl darted across the impenetrable heavy metal to the air lock. He jerked himself down into its dazzling depths. His adjusted body dissolved through the two other locks. And then he was at one end of a long, gleaming corridor—safe for the moment!

There would be searching for him: and—he knew with a cold, hardening resolve—these creatures would never trust alive a being who could slip through solid metal. Their reason would tell them he was a superbeing, unutterably dangerous to them.

One advantage only he had—they did not know the deadliness of his purpose.

TEN MINUTES later, Morton's gray eyes flicked questioningly over the stern faces of the men gathered in the great reception room. His huge and powerful body felt oddly

rigid, as if his muscles could not quite relax. His voice was mellow, deeper, richer than normal:

"I am going to offer my resignation on the ground that, for the second time under my leadership, an abnormal beast has gotten aboard this craft. I must assume that there is a basic lack in my mental make-up; for results, and not excuses, do count in this universe of ours; even apparently bad luck is rigorously bound up with character. I, therefore, suggest that Korita or von Grossen be named commander in my place. Korita because of the care he advocated, and von Grossen on the strength of his objection to taking any living specimens aboard—both are more fitted to hold the command than I am."

"The honorable commander has forgotten one thing," Korita said softly. "The creature was *not* carried into the ship. I admit it was our collective intention to bring him aboard, but it was he himself who entered. I suggest that, even if we had decided not to bring him into the interior, we could not have prevented his entry in view of his ability to slip through metal. It is absolutely absurd for Commander Morton to feel responsible."

Von Grossen heaved himself out of his chair. Now that he was out of his spacesuit, the physicist looked not so much plump as big and iron-hard. "And that goes for me all the way. I have not been long on this ship, but I have found Commander Morton to be a most able intellect and leader of men. So let us not waste time in useless self-reproach.

"In capturing this being we must first of all straighten our minds about him. He has arms and legs, this creature, yet floats in space, and remains alive. He allows himself to be caught in a cage, but knows all the time that the cage cannot hold him. Then he drops through the bottom of the cage, which is very silly if he doesn't want us to know that he can do it. Which means that he is a very foolish creature indeed, and we don't have to worry very much about him. There is a reason why intelligent living things make mistakes—a fundamental reason that should make it easy for us to analyze him right back to where he came from, and why he is here. Smith, analyze his biological make-up."

Smith stood up, lank and grim. "We've already discussed the obvious planetary origin of his hands and feet. The ability to live in space, however, is an abnormal development, having no connection with natural evolution, but is the product of brain power and science, pure and simple. I suggest that here is a member of a race that has solved the final secrets of biology; and, if I knew how we should even begin to start looking for a creature that can slip through walls, my advice would be: Hunt him down and kill him within an hour."

"ER!" KELLIE, the sociologist, said. He was a bald-headed man with preternaturally intelligent eyes that gleamed owlily from behind his pince-nez. "Er, any being who could fit himself to vacuum of space condition would be lord of the universe. His kind would dwell on every planet, clutter up every galactic system. Swarms of him would be floating in space, if space floating is what they go in for. Yet, we know for a fact that his race does not rule *our* galactic area. A paradox, which is worthy of investigation."

"I don't quite understand what you mean, Kellie!" Morton frowned.

"Simply, er, that a race which has solved the final secrets of biology must be millions, even billions of years in advance of man; and, as a pure sympodial—capable of adaptation to any environment—would, according to the lay of vital dynamics, expand to the farthest frontier of the universe, just as man is slowly pushing himself to the remotest planets."

"It is a contradiction," Morton agreed, "and would seem to prove that the creature is not a superior being. Korita, what is this thing's history?"

The Japanese scientist shrugged: "I'm afraid I can only be of the slightest assistance on present evidence. You know the prevailing theory: That life proceeds upwards by a series of cycles. Each cycle begins with the peasant, who is rooted to his bit of soil. The peasant comes to market; and slowly the market place transforms to a town, with ever less 'inward' connection to the earth. Then we have cities and nations, finally the soulless world cities and a devastating struggle for power—a series of frightful

wars which sweep men back to the peasant stage. The question becomes: Is this creature in the peasant part of this particular cycle, or in the big city 'megalopolitan' era?"

Morton's voice slashed across the silence: "In view of our limited knowledge of this creature, what basic traits should we look for, supposing him to be in the big city stage?"

"He would be a cold, invincible intellect, formidable to the ultimate degree, undefeatable—except through circumstances. I refer to the kind of circumstances that made it impossible for us to prevent this beast entering our ship. Because of his great innate intelligence, he would make no errors of any kind."

"But he has already made an error!" von Grossen said in a silken voice. "He very foolishly fell through the bottom of the cage. It is the kind of blunder a peasant would make—"

"Suppose," Morton asked, "he were in the peasant stage?"

"Then," Korita replied, "his basic impulses would be much simpler. There would be first of all the desire to reproduce, to have a son, to know that his blood was being carried on. Assuming great fundamental intelligence, this impulse might, in the superior being, take the form of a fanatic drive toward race survival—"

He stopped, as half a dozen men came through the doorway.

Morton said: "Finished, Pennons?"

The chief engineer nodded. Then in a warning voice: "It is absolutely essential that every man on the ship get into his rubberite suit, and wear rubberite gloves."

Morton explained grimly. "We've energized the walls around the bedrooms. There may be some delay in catching this creature, and we're taking no chances of being murdered in our beds. We—" Sharply: "What is it, Pennons?"

Pennons was staring at a small instrument in his hand; he said in a queer voice: "Are we all here, Morton?"

"Yes, except for four men guarding the engine room."

"Then . . . then something's caught in the wall of force. Quick—we must surround it."

To Xtl, returning from a brief exploration of the monster ship's interior, the shock was devastating, the surprise unutterable and complete.

One moment he was thinking complacently of the metal sections in the hold of the ship, where he would secrete his *guuls*; the next moment he was caught in the full sparkling fury of an energy screen.

His body writhed with an agony that blackened his brain. Thick clouds of free electrons rose up within him in that hell of pain, and flashed from system to system seeking union, only to be violently repelled by the tortured, madly spinning atom systems. For those long seconds, the wonderfully balanced instability of his structure nearly collapsed into an abyss of disintegration.

But the incredible genius that had created his marvelous body had forethought even this eventuality. Like lightning, his body endured readjustment after automatic readjustment, each new-built structure carrying the intolerable load for a fraction of a fraction of a second. And then, he had jerked back from the wall, and was safe.

In a flare of thought, his mind investigated the immediate possibilities. Obviously, the men had rigged up this defense wall of force. It meant they would have an alarm system—and they would swoop down every corridor in an organized attempt to corner him.

Xtl's eyes were glowing pools of white fire as he realized the opportunity. He must catch one of these men, while they were scattered, investigate his *guul* properties, and use him for his first *guul*.

No time to waste. He darted into the nearest wall, a tall, gaudy, ungraceful streak, and, without pausing, sped through room after room, roughly parallel to a main corridor. His sensitive feet caught the vibrations of the approaching men; and through the wall his full vision followed the blurred figures rushing past. One, two, three, four—five—on this corridor. The fifth man was some distance behind the others.

Like a wraith, Xtl glided into the wall just ahead of the last man—and pounced forth in an irresistible charge. A rearing, frightful shape of glaring eyes and ghastly mouth, blood-red, metal-hard body, and four arms of fire that clutched with bitter strength at the human body.

The man tried to fight. His big form twisted, jerked; his lashing fists felt vaguely painful as they pounded desperately against the hard, sheeny crust of Xtl's body. And then, by sheer weight and ferocity, he was overwhelmed; the force of his fall jarring Xtl's sensitive frame.

The man was lying on his back, and Xtl watched curiously as the mouth opened and shut spasmodically. A tingling sensation sped along Xtl's feet, and his mouth opened in a snarl. Incapable though he was of hearing sounds, he realized that he was picking up the vibrations of a call for help.

He pounced forward, one great hand smashing at the man's mouth. Teeth broke, and crushed back into the throat. The body sagged. But the man was still alive, and conscious, as Xtl plunged two hands into the feebly writhing body.

The man ceased suddenly even that shadow of struggle, his widened eyes staring at the arms that vanished under his shirt, stirred around in his chest, stared in petrified terror at the monstrous blood-red cylindrical body that loomed over him, with its round bright eyes glaring at him as if they would see right through him.

It was a blurred picture the frantic Xtl saw. The inside of the man's body seemed solid flesh. He had to find an open space, or one that could be pressed open, so long as the pressing did not kill the man. He must have living flesh.

Hurry, hurry— His feet registered the vibrations of approaching footsteps—from one direction only, but coming swiftly, swiftly.

And then, just like that, it was all over. His searching fingers, briefly hardened to a state of semisolidity, touched the heart. The man heaved convulsively, shuddered, and slumped into death.

The next instant, Xtl discovered the stomach. For a moment, black dismay flooded him. Here was what he was searching for, and he had killed it, rendered it useless! He stared in cold fury at the stilled body, uncertain, alarmed.

Then suddenly his actions became deliberate, weighted with contempt. Never for an instant had he suspected these

intelligent beings would die so easily. It changed, simplified everything. There was no need to be anything more than casually careful in dealing with them.

Two men with drawn ato-guns whipped around the nearest corner, and slid to a halt at the sight of the apparition that snarled at them across the dead body. Then, as they came out of their brief paralysis, Xtl stepped into the nearest wall, a blur of scarlet in that brightly lit corridor, gone on the instant. He felt the fury of the energy rays that tore futilely at the metal behind him.

His plan was quite clear now. He would capture half a dozen men, and make *guuls* of them. Then kill all the others, proceed on to the galactic system toward which the ship was heading, and take control of the first inhabited planet. After that, domination of the entire universe would be a matter of a short time only.

COMMANDER MORTON stood very stiffly there in the gleaming corridor, every muscle in his huge body like a taut wire. Only a dozen men were gathered round the dead body, but the audioscopes were on; nearly two hundred tense men throughout the ship were watching that scene. Morton's voice was only a whisper, but it cut across the silence like a whiplash.

"Well, doctor?"

Dr. Eggert rose up from his kneeling position beside the body, frowning.

"Heart failure."

"*Heart failure!*"

"All right, all right!" The doctor put up his hands as if to defend himself against physical attack. "I know his teeth look as if they've been smashed back into his brain, and I know Darjeeling's heart was perfect, but heart failure is what it looks like to me."

"I can believe it," a man said sourly. "When I came around that corner, and saw that thing, I nearly had heart failure myself."

"We're wasting time!" von Grossen's voice stabbed from behind Morton. "We can beat this fellow, but not by talking about him, and feeling sick every time he makes a move. If I'm next on the list of victims, I want to know that the best damned bunch of scientists in the system are

not crying over my fate, but putting their best brains to the job of avenging my death."

"You're right," Smith said. "The trouble with us is, we've been permitting ourselves to feel inferior. He's only been on the ship about an hour but I can see now that some of us are going to get killed. Well, I accept my chance! But let's get organized for combat!"

Morton snapped: "Pennons, here's a problem. We've got about two square miles of wall and floor space in our twenty levels. How long will it take to energize every inch of it?"

The chief engineer stared at him, aghast; then answered swiftly: "I could sweep the ship and probably wreck it completely within an hour. I won't go into details. But uncontrolled energization is absolutely out. It would kill every living thing aboard—"

"Not everything!" von Grossen rejected. "Not the creature. Remember, that damn thing ran into a wall of force. Your instrument, Pennons, registered activity for several seconds. Several seconds! Let me show you what that means. The principle underlying his ability to slip through walls is simple enough. The atoms of his body slide through the empty spaces between the atoms of the walls. There is a basic electronic tension that holds a body together, which would have to be overcome, but apparently his race has solved the difficulty. A wall of force would increase those electronic tensions to a point where the atoms themselves would be emitting free electrons; and, theoretically, that should have a deadly effect on any interfering body. I'll wager he didn't like those few seconds he was in the wall—but the point is, he stood them."

Morton's strong face was hard: "You could feed more energy to those walls, couldn't you, Pennons?"

"N-no!" said Pennons reluctantly. "The walls couldn't stand it. They'd melt."

"*The walls couldn't stand it!*" a man gasped. "Man, man, do you know what you're making this creature out to be?"

Morton saw the consternation that leaped along that line of stern faces. Korita's thin, clear voice cut across that pregnant silence:

"Let us not forget, my honorable friends, that he did blunder into the wall of force, and recoiled in dismay, though apparently without damage to his person. I use the word 'blunder' with discretion. His action proves once again that he does make mistakes which, in turn, shows him to be something less than a superbeing—"

"Suppose," Morton barked, "he's a peasant of his cycle. What would be his chief intellectual characteristic?"

Korita replied almost crisply for one who usually spoke so slowly: "The inability to understand the full power of organization. He will think probably that all he has to fight in order to get control of this ship would be the men who are in it. His most instinctive reasoning would tend to discount the fact that we are part of a vast galactic civilization or organization, and that the spirit of that civilization is fighting in us. The mind of the true peasant is very individualistic, almost anarchic. His desire to reproduce is a form of egoism, to have his own blood particularly carried on. There can be no such thing as a peasant co-operative or organization. But this creature may want to have numbers of beings similar to himself beside him to help him with his fight. But, though there would be a loose union, they would fight as individuals, and not as a group."

"A loose union of those fire-eaters ought to be enough!" a crew member commented acidly. "I . . . a-a-a-a—"

His voice sagged. His lower jaw drooped two inches. His eyes, under Morton's gaze, took on a horribly goggled stare. The commander whipped around with an oath.

XTL STOOD HERE, forbidding specter from a scarlet hell, his eyes pools of blazing alertness. He knew with a vast contempt that he could plunge into the nearest wall before any gun could leap out at him in ravening fury. But he felt himself protected by another fact. These were intelligent beings. They would be more anxious to discover why he had deliberately come out of the wall than to kill him immediately. They might even consider it a friendly move; and, when they discovered differently, it would be too late.

His purpose, which was twofold, was simplicity itself. He had come for his first *guul*. By snatching that *guul*

from their very midst, he would demoralize them thoroughly.

Morton felt a curious wave of unreality sweep over him, as he stood just behind von Grossen there in that glittering hallway, facing the tall, thick, cylindrical reality of Xtl. Instinctively, his fingers groped downward toward the sparkling, translucent handle of the ato-gun that protruded from his holster. He stopped himself, and said in a steady voice:

"Don't touch your guns. He can move like a flash; and he wouldn't be here if he thought we could draw on him. I'll take his opinion any day on that point. Besides, we can't risk failure. This may be our only chance!"

He continued in a swift, slightly higher, more urgent tone: "Every man listening in on the audioscopes get above and below and around this corridor. Bring up the heaviest portables, even some of the semiportables and burn the walls down. Cut a clear path all around this area, and have your beams sweep that space at narrow focus. Move!"

"Good boy, Morton!" Pennons' face appeared for an instant on the plate of the audioscope. "We'll be there—if you can stall that hellhound three minutes."

Korita's sibilant voice hissed out of the audioscope: "Morton, take this chance, but do not count on success. Notice that he has appeared once again before we have had time for a discussion. He is rushing us, whether intentionally or accidentally matters not, because the result is that we're on the run, scurrying this way and that, futilely. So far we have not clarified our thoughts. I am convinced the vast resources of this ship can defeat any creature—any single creature—that has ever existed, or that ever will exist, but only if we have time to use them—"

His voice blurred briefly in Morton's ears. Von Grossen had taken a notebook from his pocket, and was sketching rapidly. He tore the sheet loose, and stepped forward, handed it to the creature, who examined it curiously.

Von Grossen stepped back, and began to sketch again on the second page, with a swift deftness. This sheet he handed also the creature, who took one glance at it, and stepped back with a snarl that split his face. His

eyes widened to blazing pools; one arm half reached forward toward von Grossen, then paused uncertainly.

"What the devil have you done?" Morton demanded, his voice sounding unnaturally shrill even to himself.

VON GROSSEN took several steps backward, until he stood level with Morton. To the commander's amazement, he was grinning:

"I've just shown him," the German physicist said softly, "how we can defeat him—neutronium alloy, of course and he—"

Too late, Morton stepped forward, instinctively trying to interpose his huge form in front of von Grossen. A blur of red swept by him. Something—a hand moving so fast that it was invisible—struck him a stunning blow, and knocked him spinning against the nearest wall. For an instant, his body threatened to collapse from sheer, dazed weakness. The world went black, then white, then black.

With appalling effort, he fought the weakness aside. The immense reservoir of strength in his magnificent body surged irresistibly forward; his knees stopped wavering, but his vision was still a crazy thing. As through a distorted glass, he saw that the thing was holding von Grossen in two fire-colored arms. The two-hundred-and-ten-pound physicist gave one convulsive heave of dismay; and then seemed to accept the overpowering strength of those thin, hard muscles.

With a bellow, Morton clawed for his gun. And it was then that the maddest thing of all happened. The creature took a running dive, and vanished into the wall, still holding von Grossen. For an instant, it seemed to Morton like a crazy trick of vision. But there was only the smooth gleamingness of the wall, and eleven staring, perspiring men, seven of them with drawn weapons, which they fingered helplessly.

"We're lost!" a man whispered. "If he can adjust our atomic structure, and take us through walls, we can't fight him."

Morton chilled his heart to the dismay he read in that rough semicircle of faces. He said coldly:

"Your report, Pennons?"

There was a brief delay, then the engineer's lean leathery face, drawn with strain and effort, stared into the plate: "Nothing!" he replied succinctly. "Clay, one of my assistants, thinks he saw a flash of scarlet disappearing through a floor, going down. That's a clue of course. It means our search will be narrowed to the lower half of the ship. As for the rest, we were just lining up our units when it happened. You gave us only two minutes. We needed three!"

Morton nodded, his thoughtful mood interrupted by the abrupt realization that his fingers were shaking. With a muttered imprecation, he clenched them, and said icily:

"Korita has given us our cue—organization. The implications of that word must be fully thought out, and coordinated to the knowledge we have of the creature. Von Grossen, of course, has given us our defense—neutronium alloy."

"I don't follow the argument," interjected Zeller, the metallurgist.

It was Smith who explained: "The commander means that only two parts of the ship are composed of that incredibly dense metal, the outer shell and the engine room. If you had been with us when we first captured this creature, you would have noticed that, when the damned thing fell through the floor of the cage, it was stopped short by the hard metal of the ship's crust. The conclusion is obviously that it cannot slip through such metal; and the fact that it ran for the air lock is proof. The wonder is that we didn't think of it before."

Morton barked: "Therefore, to the heart of the ship—the engine room. And we won't go out of there till we've got a plan. Any other way, he'll run us ragged."

"What about von Grossen?" a man ventured.

Morton snapped harshly: "Don't make us think of von Grossen. Do you want us all to go crazy?"

IN THAT vast room of vast machines, the men were dwarfs in *gigantica*. It was a world apart; and Morton, for the first time in years, felt the alien, abnormal tremendousness of it. His nerves jumped at each special burst of unholy blue light that sparkled and coruscated upon the great, glistening sweep of the ceiling. Blue light that was

alive, pure energy that no eliminators had ever been able to eliminate, no condensers absorb.

And there was something else that sawed on his nerves now. A sound—imprisoned in the very air! A thin hum of terrifying power, a vague rumble, the faintest, quivering reverberation of an inconceivable flow of energy.

Morton glanced at his watch, and stood up with an explosive sigh of relief. He swept up a small sheaf of notes from a metal desk. The silence of unsmiling men became the deeper, tenser silence of men who fixed him with their eyes. The commander began:

"This is the first breathing spell we've had since that creature came aboard less than—incredible as it may seem—less than two hours ago. I've been glancing through these notes you've given me, and I've divided them into two sections: those that can be discussed while we're putting into effect the purely mechanical plans for cornering the thing—these latter must be discussed now. There are two. First, Zeller!"

The metallurgist stepped forward, a brisk, middle-aged, young-looking man. He started: "The creature made no attempt to keep the drawings which von Grossen showed it—proof, incidentally, that von Grossen was not seized because of the drawings. They fell on the floor; and I picked them up. I've been showing them around, so most of you know that the first drawing is a likeness of the creature stepping through a metal wall; and beside the wall is an enlarged atom system of the type of which the wall is composed—two hundred electrons arranged about the nucleus, forming a series of triangles.

"The second picture was a rough, unfinished but unmistakable single atom of neutronium alloy, with only eight hundred of the forty thousand electrons showing, but the design of each eighty electrons with their sixteen sides clearly indicated. That kind of language is intergalactic; and the creature understood the point instantly. He didn't like it, as we all saw by his actions; but apparently he had no intention of being thwarted; and perhaps saw the difficulty we might have in using such knowledge against him. Because, just as we cannot energize the walls of the whole ship—Pennons has said it would

take days—so we have no materials to plate the ship throughout with neutronium alloy. The stuff is too rare.

"However, we have enough for me to build a suit of space armor, with which one of us could search for von Grossen, whom the thing is obviously hiding behind some wall. For the search, naturally, we'd use a fluorite camera. My assistant is already working out the suit, but we'd like suggestions—"

There were none; and, after a moment, Zeller disappeared into the machine shops adjoining the engine room. Morton's grim face relaxed slightly.

"For myself, I feel better knowing that, once the suit is built—in about an hour—the creature will have to keep moving von Grossen in order to prevent us from discovering the body. It's good to know that there's a chance of getting back one of the boldest minds aboard the ship."

"How do you know he's alive?" a man asked.

"Because the creature could have taken Darjeeling's dead body, but didn't. He wants us alive—Smith's notes have given us a possible clue to his purpose, but let that go now. Pennons, outline the plan you have—this is our main plan, gentlemen; and we stand or fall by it."

THE chief engineer came forward; and it worried Morton to note that he was frowning blackly. His usually dynamic body lacked briskness and suggested uncertainty. The implications of the lack of confidence were mind-shaking. The mechanical wizard, the man who knew more about energy and its practical application than any other living human being—this man unsure of himself—

His voice added to Morton's dismay. It held a harsh, nasal tone that the commander had never heard from him in all the years he had known the man.

"My news isn't pleasant. To energize this ship under a controlled system would require about a hundred hours. There are approximately two square miles of floors and walls, mostly walls. And of course, as I said before, uncontrolled energization would be suicide.

"My plan is to energize the seventh level and the ninth, only the floors and not the walls. Our hope is this: so far the creature has made no organized attempt to kill us.

Korita says that this is because he is a peasant, and does not fully realize the issues at stake. As a peasant he is more concerned with reproduction, though what form that is taking, and why he has captured von Grossen is a matter for our biologist. We know, as apparently he does not, that it's a case of destroy him, or he'll destroy us. Sooner or later, even a peasant will realize that killing us comes first, before anything else, and from that moment we're lost. Our chance is that he'll delay too long—a vague chance, but we must accept it because it is based on the only analysis of the creature that we have—Korita's! If he doesn't interfere with our work, then we'll trap him on the eighth level, between the two energized floors."

Somebody interjected with a swift question: "Why not energize the seventh and eighth levels, so that he'll be in hell the moment he starts down?"

"Because"—Pennons' eyes glittered with a hard, unpleasant light—"when he starts down, he'll have one of us with him. We want that man to have a chance for life. The whole plan is packed with danger. It will take about an hour and a half to prepare the floors for energizing."

His voice became a harsh, grating sound: "And during that ninety minutes we'll be absolutely helpless against him, except for our heavy service guns. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he will carry us off at the rate of one every three minutes."

"Thirty out of a hundred and eighty!" Morton cut in with a chill incisiveness. "One out of every six in this room. Do we take the chance? Those in favor raise their hands."

He noted with intense satisfaction that not one man's hand but was raised.

THE REAPPEARANCE of the men brought Xfi up to the seventh level with a rush. A vague anxiety pushed into his consciousness, but there was no real sense of doubt, not even a shadow of the mental sluggishness that had afflicted him at first. For long minutes, he was an abnormal shape that flitted like some evil monster from a forgotten hell through that wilderness of walls and corridors.

Twice he was seen; and ugly guns flashed at him—guns as different from the simple action ato-guns as life from death. He analyzed them from their effects, the way they smashed down the walls, and made hard metal run like water. Heavy duty electronic guns these, discharging completely disintegrated atoms, a stream of pure electrons that sought union with stable matter in a coruscating fury of senseless desire.

He could face guns like that, but only for the barest second would the spinning atom system within his body carry that intolerable load. Even the biologists, who had perfected the Xtl race, had found their limitations in the hot, ravaging energy of smashed atoms.

The important thing was: "What were the men doing with such determination? Obviously, when they shut themselves up in the impregnable engine room, they had conceived a plan—" With glittering, unwinking eyes, Xtl watched that plan take form.

In every corridor, men slaved over atomic furnaces, squat things of dead-black metal. From a hole in the top of each furnace, a white glare spewed up, blazing forth in uncontrollable ferocity at the ceilings; intolerable flares of living fire, dazzling almost beyond endurance to Xtl protected by a solid metal wall as well as by his superlatively conditioned body.

He could see that the men were half dazed by the devastating whiteness that beat against their vision. They wore their space armor with the ordinary transparent glassite electrically darkened. But no light metal armor could ward off the full effect of the deadly rays that sprayed, violent and untamed, in every direction.

Out of the furnaces rolled long dully glowing strips of some material, which were instantly snatched into the maw of machine tools, skillfully hacked into exactly measured sections, and slapped onto the floors. Not an inch of floor, Xtl noticed, escaped being inclosed in some way or another by these strips. And the moment the strips were laid, massive refrigerators hugged close to them, and froze the heat out of them.

His mind refused at first to accept the result of his observations. His brain persisted in searching for deeper purposes, for a cunning of vast and not easily discernible

scope. Somewhere there must be a scheme that would explain the appalling effort the men were making. Slowly, he realized the truth.

There was nothing more. These beings were actually intending to attempt the building of walls of force throughout the entire ship under a strict system of controls—anything less, of course, was out of the question. They could not be so foolish as to think that a partial energization could have the faintest hope of success. If such hope smoldered, it was doomed to be snuffed out.

And total energization was equally impossible. Could they not realize that he would not permit such a thing; and that it would be a simple matter to follow them about, and tear loose their energization connections?

IN COLD CONTEMPT, Xtl dismissed the machinations of the men from his mind. They were only playing into his hands, making it easier for him to get the *guuls* he still needed.

He selected his next victim as carefully as he had selected von Grossen. He had discovered in the dead man—Darjeeling—that the stomach was the place he wanted; and the men with the largest stomachs were automatically on his list.

The action was simplicity itself. A cold, merciless survey of the situation from the safety of a wall, a deadly swift rush and—before a single beam could blaze out in sullen rage—he was gone with the writhing, struggling body.

It was simple to adjust his atomic structure the instant he was through a ceiling, and so break his fall on the floor beneath; then dissolve through the floor onto the level below in the same fashion. Into the vast hold of the ship, he half fell, half lowered himself.

The hold was familiar territory now to the sure-footed tread of his long-toed feet. He had explored the place briefly but thoroughly after he first boarded the ship. And the handling of von Grossen had given him the exact experience he needed for this man.

Unerringly, he headed across the dimly lit interior toward the far wall. Great packing cases piled up to the ceiling. Without pause, he leaped into them; and, by dexterous adjustment of his structure, found himself after

a moment in a great pipe, big enough for him to stand upright—part of the miles of air-conditioning pipes in the vast ship.

It was dark by ordinary light, but to his full vision a vague twilight glow suffused the place. He saw the body of von Grossen, and deposited his new victim beside the physicist. Carefully now, he inserted one of his slender hands into his own breast; and removed one precious egg—deposited it into the stomach of the human being.

The man had ceased struggling, but Xtl waited for what he knew must happen. Slowly, the body began to stiffen, the muscles growing rigid. The man stirred; then, in evident panic, began to fight as he realized the paralysis that was stealing over him. But remorselessly Xtl held him down.

Abruptly, the chemical action was completed. The man lay motionless, every muscle stiff as a rock, a horrible thing of taut flesh.

There were no doubts now in Xtl's mind. Within a few hours, the eggs would be hatching inside each man's stomach; and in a few hours more the tiny replicas of himself would have eaten themselves to full size.

Grimly complacent, he darted up out of the hold. He needed more hatching places for his eggs, more *guuls*.

ON THE ninth level now, the men slaved. Waves of heat rolled along the corridor, a veritable inferno wind; even the refrigeration unit in each spacesuit was hard put to handle that furious, that deadly blast of superheated air. Men sweated in their suits, sick from the heat, dazed by the glare, laboring almost by instinct.

At last, Morton shut off his own furnace. "Thank Heaven, that's finished!" he exclaimed; then urgently: "Pennons, are you ready to put your plan into effect?"

"Ready, aye, ready!" came the engineer's dry rasp of a voice on the communicators. He finished even more harshly: "Four men gone and one to go. We've been lucky—but there is one to go!"

"Do you hear that, you spacehounds!" Morton barked. "One to go. One of us will be bait—and don't hold your guns in your hands. He must have the chance at that bait. Kellie, elaborate on those notes you gave me before.

It will clear up something very important, and keep our minds off that damned thing."

"Er!" The cracked voice of the sociologist jarred the communicators. "Er, here is my reasoning. When we discovered the thing it was floating a million light-years from the nearest system, apparently without means of spatial locomotion. Picture that appalling distance, and then ask yourself how long it would require for an object to float by it by pure chance. Gunlie Lester gave me my figures, so I wish he would tell you what he told me."

"Gunlie Lester speaking!" The voice of the astronomer sounded surprisingly brisk. "Most of you know the prevailing theory of the beginnings of the present universe: that it was formed by the disintegration of a *previous* universe several million million years ago, and that a few million million years hence our universe will complete its cycle in a torrent of explosions, and be replaced by another, which will develop from the maelstrom. As for Kellie's question, it is not at all impossible; in fact, it would require several million million years for a creature floating by pure chance to reach a point a million light-years from a planet. That is what you wanted, Kellie?"

"Er, yes. Most of you will recall my mentioning before that it was a paradox that a pure sympodial development, such as this creature, did not populate the entire universe. The answer is that, logically, if his race *should* have controlled the universe, then they *did* control it. We human beings have discovered that logic is the sole stable factor in the all; and we cannot shrink even from the most far-reaching conclusions that the mind may arrive at. This race did control the universe, but it was the previous universe they ruled, not our present one. Now, naturally, the creature intends that his race shall also dominate this universe."

"In short," Morton snapped, "we are faced with the survivor of the supreme race of a universe. There is no reason to assume that they did not arrive at our present level of progress any later than we did; and we've still got several million million years to go before our universe crashes into flaming death. Therefore, they are not only billions of years ahead of us, but millions of millions of years." His voice took on a strained note: "Frankly, it

scares me. We're not doing enough. Our plans are too sketchy. We must have more information before we can hope to win against such a super-human monster. I'm very much afraid that—"

The shrill scream of a man protruded horribly into his words, and there came a gurgling "—got me . . . quick . . . ripping me out of my suit—"

The voice collapsed; and somebody shouted in frank dismay: "Good Heaven! That was Dack, my assistant!"

THE WORLD of ship became, for Morton, a long, shining corridor that persisted in blurring before his eyes. And it was suddenly as if he were looking, not out at it, but down into its depths—fearsome depths that made his brain reel.

Ages seemed to pass. But Morton, schooled now to abnormal calm, knew that only fractions of seconds were dragging by. Just as his nerves threatened to break, he heard a voice, Pennons' voice, cool, steady, yet almost unrecognizable:

"One!" said Pennons; and it sounded absolute mumbo-jumbo in that moment when out there another man was going through a hell of fear and torment.

"Two!" said Pennons, cold as ice.

Morton found himself staring curiously at his feet. Sparkling, brilliant, beautiful blue fire throbbled there. Little tendrils of that gorgeous flame reared up hungrily a few inches from his suit, as if baffled by some invisible force protecting the suit.

There was a distinct click in Morton's mind. Instantly, his brain jumped to full fear. In a flash of thought, he realized that Pennons had energized floors seven and nine. And that it was blue ferocity of the energization that was struggling to break through the full-driven screens of his space armor.

Through his communicators came the engineer's hiss of indrawn breath: "If I'm right," Pennons almost whispered, all the strength gone from his voice, "we've now got that—devil—cornered on the eighth floor."

"Then," barked Morton efficiently, "we'll carry on according to plan. Group one, follow me to the seventh floor."

The men behind Morton stopped short as he halted abruptly at the second corner. Sickly, he went forward, and stood staring at the human body that sagged against the floor, pasted to the metal by almost unbearably brilliant fingers of blue fire. His voice, when he spoke, was only a whisper, but it cut across the strain of silence like a whiplash:

"Pull him loose!"

Two men stepped gingerly forward, and touched the body. The blue fire leaped ravenously at them, straining with futile ferocity to break through the full-driven defense screens of their suits. The men jerked, and the unholy bonds snapped. They carried the body up the nearest stairs to the unenergized eighth level. The other men followed silently, and watched as the body was laid on the floor.

The lifeless thing continued to kick for several minutes, discharging torrents of energy, then gradually took on the quietness of natural death.

"I'm waiting for reports!" Morton said stiffly into his communicators.

Pennons' voice came. "The men are spread out over the eighth floor according to plan, taking continuous pictures with fluorite cameras. If he's anywhere on the floor, we'll get a picture of his swift-moving body; and then it will be a matter of energizing the floor piecemeal. It'll take about thirty minutes yet—"

And finally the report came: "Nothing!" Pennons' voice held an incredulous note tinged with dismay. "Morton, he's not here. It can only mean that he passed through the energized floor as easily as through ordinary metal. We know he must have gone through it because Dack's dead body was on *this* side."

Somebody said hopelessly: "And now what are we going to do?"

Morton didn't answer. It struck him abruptly, with a shock that tore away his breath, that he had no answer.

THE SILENCE in that shining corridor was a form of death. It pressed against Morton, a queer, murky, lightless thing. Death was written too in the faces that blurred

around him, the cold, logical death expectancy of men who could see no way out.

Morton broke the silence: "I am willing to accept von-Grossen's analysis of how the thing passes through metal. But he intimated the creature recoiled from the energized wall. Can anyone explain then—how?"

"Zeller speaking!" The brisk voice of the metallurgist came through the communicators. "I've finished the neutronium-alloy suit, and I've started my search at the bottom of the ship—I heard your question, Morton. To my mind, we missed one point the first time the creature struck the wall of force: The point is that he *was* in it. And what basic difference is there between being partially inside the wall, and actually passing through? He could pass through in less than a second. The first time, he touched the wall for several seconds, which probably means that, in his surprise, he recoiled and lost his balance. That must have made his position very unpleasant. The second time, however, he simply released poor Dack and passed on through with a minimum of discomfort."

"Hm-m-m!" Morton pondered. "That means he's still vulnerable to walls of force, provided we could keep him inside one for a long enough time. And that would mean complete energization of the ship which, in turn, would depend on his allowing us to make the connections without interference. I think he would interfere. He let us get away with energizing the two floors because he knew it didn't mean anything—and it gave him a good opportunity to kidnap some more men. Fortunately, he didn't grab off as many as we expected, though Heaven help those four."

Smith said grimly, his first words in a long time: "My firm opinion is that anything that would require more than two hours to complete will be fatal. We are dealing with a creature who has everything to gain by killing us, and obtaining control of the ship. Zeller, how long would it take to build neutronium-alloy suits for every man on this ship?"

"About two hundred hours," the metallurgist replied coolly, "mainly because I used up nearly all the available alloy for this one suit. We'd have to break down the

walls of the ship, and build the alloy from an electronic base. We're not in the habit of carrying a lot of metal on this ship, as you know, because there's usually a planet a few minutes from anywhere. Now, we've still got a two week's trip either way."

"Then that's out!" frowned Smith blackly. He looked stunned. "And since the complete energization is out—we've got nothing else."

The usually lazy voice of Gourlay, the communications chief, snapped: "I don't see why those ways are out. We're still alive; and I suggest we get to work, and do as much as we can as soon as we can—everybody working first at making suits for the men who go out to prepare the walls for energizing. At least, that will protect them from being kidnaped."

"What makes you think," Smith asked coldly, "that the creature is not capable of smashing down neutronium alloy? As a superior being, his knowledge of physics should make it a simple matter for him to construct a beam that could destroy anything we have. Heaven knows there's plenty of tools lying in the various laboratories."

THE TWO MEN glared at each other with the flashing, angry eyes of men whose nerves have been strained to the utmost limit. Before Morton could speak, Korita's sibilant voice cut across the tense silence: "I am inclined to agree with Smith. We are dealing with a being who must now know that he cannot allow us time for anything important. I agree with the commander when he says that the creature will interfere if we attempt to prepare the ship for complete controlled energization. The honorable gentlemen must not forget, however, that we are dealing with a creature whom we have decided is in the peasant stage of his particular cycle.

"Let me enlarge on that. Life is an ebb and flow. There is a full tide of glorious accomplishment, and a low tide of recuperation. For generations, centuries, the blood flows in the peasant, turgid, impure, gathering strength from the soil; and then it begins to grow, to expand, reaching finally for the remotest stars. At this point, amazingly enough, the blood grows weary; and, in this late mega-

politan era, men no longer desire to prolong their race. Highly cultivated people regard having children as a question of pros and cons, and their general outlook on life is tinged with a noble skepticism.

"Nature, on the other hand, knows nothing of pro and con. You cannot reason with a peasant—and he cannot reason except as a peasant. His land and his son, or—to put a higher term to it—his property and his blood are sacred. If a bourgeoisie court orders him off his land, he fights blindly, ignorantly, for his own. It matters not to him that he may have accepted money for a mortgage. He only knows they're trying to take his property, to draw his roots from the soil where his blood has been nourished.

"Honorable sirs, here is my point: This creature cannot begin to imagine anyone else not feeling about his patch of home—his own property the way he does.

"But we . . . we can make such a sacrifice without suffering a spiritual collapse."

Every muscle in Morton's body grew taut, as he realized the implications. His exclamation was almost a whisper: "Korita, you've got it! It means sacrificing von Grossen and the others. It means sacrifice that makes my brain reel, but property is not sacred to us. And as for von Grossen and the other three"—his voice grew stern and hard, his eyes wide with a chill horror—"I didn't tell you about the notes that Smith gave me. I didn't tell you because he suggested a possible parallel with a certain species of wasp back home on the earth. The thought is so horrible that I think instantaneous death will come as a release to these bold men."

"The wasp!" A man gasped. "You're right, Morton. The sooner they're dead the better!"

"Then," Morton cried, "to the engine room. We—"

A swift, excited voice clamored into his communications; it was a long second before he recognized it as belonging to Zeller, the metallurgist:

"Morton—quick! Down to the hold! I've found them—in the air-conditioning pipe. The creature's here, and I'm holding him off as best I can. He's trying to sneak upon me through the walls. Hurry!"

Morton snapped orders with machine-gun precision,

as the men swarmed toward the elevators: "Smith, take a dozen men and get Kent down from the bedrooms to the engine room. I'd almost forgotten about him and his broken leg! Pennons, take a hundred men to the engine room and make the preparations to carry out Korita's plan. The rest take the four heavy freight elevators and follow me!"

He finished in a ringing voice: "We won't kill him in the hold of course, unless he's gone stark mad. But the crisis has come! Things are breaking our way at last. And we've got him! We've got him!"

XTL retreated reluctantly, sullenly, as the men carried off his four *guuls*. The first shrinking fear of defeat closed over his mind like the night that brooded beyond the inclosing walls of the ship. His impulse was to dash into their midst, a whirlwind of ferocity, and smash them. But those ugly, glittering weapons congealed that wild rage.

He retreated with a dismaying sense of disaster, conscious that he had lost the initiative. The men would discover his eggs now; and, in destroying them, would destroy his immediate chances of being reinforced by other Xtls. And, what was more, they were temporarily safe in the engine room.

His brain spun into a cold web of purpose. From this moment, he must kill, and kill only. It seemed suddenly incredible that he had thought first of reproduction, with everything else coming secondary, even his every other thought blurred by that subordination to his one flaming desire.

His proper action was preternaturally clear now. Not to get his *guuls* first, but to kill these dangerous enemies, to control the ship, then head for the nearest inhabited planet, where it would be a simple matter to find other, more stupid *guuls*.

To kill he must have an irresistible weapon, one that could smash—anything! And valuable time had already been wasted. After a moment's thought, he headed for the nearest laboratory, conscious of a burning urgency, unlike anything he had ever known.

As he worked—tall, nightmare body and hideous face bent intently over the gleaming metal of the queer-shaped mechanism—his sensitive feet grew aware of a difference in the symphony of vibrations that throbbed in discordant melody through the ship.

He paused, straightened, alert and tense; and realized what it was. The drive engines were silent. The monster ship of space had halted in its head-long flight, and was lying quiescent in the black deeps.

An abrupt, indefinable sense of urgency came to Xtl—an icy alarm. His long, black, wirelike fingers became flashing things as he made delicate connections, deftly and frantically.

Suddenly, he paused again. Through his brain pulsed a distinct sensation of something wrong, dangerously, desperately, terribly wrong. The muscles of his feet grew taut with straining. Abruptly, he knew what it was.

He could no longer feel the vibrations of the men. *They had left the ship!*

Xtl whirled from his nearly finished weapon, and plunged through the nearest wall. He knew his doom with a burning certainty that found hope only in the blackness of space.

Through deserted corridors he fled, slaving slit-faced hate, scarlet monster from ancient, incredibly ancient Glor. The gleaming walls seemed to mock him. The whole world of the great ship, which had promised so much, was now only the place where sudden intolerable hell would break loose in a devastating, irresistible torrent of energy.

He saw the air lock ahead—and flashed through the first section, then the second, the third—then he was out in space. There was a sense of increasing lightness as his body flung by momentum darted from the side of the ship, out into that blackest of black nights.

For a brief instant, his body glinted and flashed a startling scarlet, reflecting the dazzling light from the row on row of brilliant portholes.

The queerest thing happened then. The porthole lights snuffed out, and were replaced by a strange, unearthly blue glow, that flashed out from every square inch of that dark, sweeping plain of metal.

The blue glow faded, died. Some of the porthole lights came on again, flickering weakly, uncertainly; and then, as mighty engines recovered from that devastating flare of blue power, the lights already shining grew stronger. Others began to flash on.

Xtl was a hundred yards from the ship when he saw the first of the torpedolike craft dart out of the surrounding night, into an opening that yawned in the side of the mighty vessel. Four other dark craft followed, whipping down in swift arcs, their shapes blurred against the background of immensity, vaguely visible in the light that glowed now, strong and steady from the lighted portholes.

The opening shut; and—just like that—the ship vanished. One instant, it was there, a vast sphere of dark metal; the next he was staring through the space where it had been at a vague swirl of light, an enormous galaxy that swam beyond a gulf of a billion years.

Time dragged drearily toward infinity. Xtl sprawled motionless and unutterably hopeless on the bosom of endless night. He couldn't help thinking of the sturdy sons he might have had, and of the universe that was lost because of his mistakes. But it was the thought of the sons, of companionship, that really brought despair.

MORTON watched the skillful fingers of the surgeon, as the electrified knife cut into the fourth man's stomach. The last egg was deposited in the bottom of the tall neutronium alloy vat.

The eggs were round, grayish objects, one of them slightly cracked.

As they watched, the crack widened; an ugly, round, scarlet head with tiny, beady eyes and a tiny slit of a mouth poked out. The head twisted on its short neck, and the eyes glittered up at them with a hard ferocity.

And then, with a swiftness that almost took them by surprise, it reared up and tried to run out of the vat, slid back—and dissolved into the flame that Morton poured down upon it.

Smith, licking his dry lips, said: "Suppose he'd got away, and dissolved into the nearest wall!"

Nobody said anything. They stood with intent eyes, staring into the vat. The eggs melted reluctantly, under the merciless fire of Morton's gun, and then burned with a queer, golden light.

"Ah," said Dr. Eggert; and attention turned to him, and the body of von Grossen, over which he was bending—"His muscles are beginning to relax, and his eyes are open and alive. I imagine he knows what's going on. It was a form of paralysis induced by the egg, and fading now that the egg is no longer present. Nothing fundamentally wrong. They'll all be O. K. shortly. What about the big fellow?"

Morton replied: "Zeller swears he saw a flash of red emerge from the main lock just as we swept the ship with uncontrolled energization. It must have been, because we haven't found his body. However, Pennons is out with half the men, taking pictures with fluorite cameras; and we'll know for certain in a few hours. Here he is now. Well, Pennons?"

The engineer strode in briskly, and placed a misshapen thing of metal on one of the tables. "Nothing definite to report yet—but I found this in the main physics laboratory. What do you make of it?"

Morton frowned down at the fragile-looking object with its intricate network of wires. There were three distinct tubes that might have been muzzles running into and through three small, round balls, that shone with a queer, silvery light. The light penetrated the table, making it as transparent as glassite. And, strangest of all, the balls irradiated, not heat, but cold.

Morton put his hand near, but the cold was of a mild, water-freezing variety, apparently harmless. He touched the metal ball. It felt as chilled metal might feel.

"I think we'd better leave this for our chief physicist to examine. Von Grossen ought to be up and around soon. You say you found it in the laboratory?"

Pennons nodded; and Morton carried on his thought: "Obviously, the creature was working on it, when he suspected that something was amiss—he must have suspected the truth, for he left the ship. That seems to discount your theory, Korita. You said that, as a true

peasant, he couldn't even imagine what we were going to do."

The Japanese historian smiled faintly through the fatigue that paled his face. "Honorable commander," he said politely, "a peasant can realize destructive intentions as easily as you or I. What he cannot do is bring himself to destroy his own property, or imagine others destroying theirs. We have no such limitations."

Pennons groaned: "I wish we had. Do you know that it will take us three months at least to get this ship properly repaired after thirty seconds of uncontrolled energization. For those thirty seconds, the ship created a field in space millions of times more intense than the energization output. I was afraid that—"

He stopped with a guilty look. Morton grinned: "Go ahead and finish what you were going to say. You were afraid the ship would be completely destroyed. Don't worry, Pennons, your previous statements as to the danger involved made us realize the risks we were taking; and we knew that our lifeboats could only be given partial antiacceleration; so we'd have been stranded here a million years from home."

A man said, thoughtfully: "Well, personally, I think there was nothing actually to fear. After all, he did belong to another universe, and there is a special rhythm to our present state of existence to which man is probably attuned. We have the advantage in this universe of momentum, which, I doubt, a creature from any other universe could hope to overcome. And in the world of man there is no just place for a creature that can even consider laying its eggs in the living flesh of other sensitive beings. All other intelligent life would unite against such a distinctly personal menace."

Smith shook his head. "There is no biological basis for your opinion, and therefore it falls in the category of 'things darkly spoken are darkly seen.' It dominated once, and it could dominate again. You assume far too readily that man is a paragon of justice, forgetting apparently that he lives on meat, enslaves his neighbors, murders his opponents, and obtains the most unholy sadistical joy from the agony of others. It is not impossible that we shall, in

the course of our travels, meet other intelligent creatures far more worthy than man to rule the universe."

"By Heaven!" replied the other, "no creature is ever getting on board this ship again, no matter how harmless he looks. My nerves are all shot; and I'm not so good a man as I was when I first came aboard the *Beagle* two long years ago."

"You speak for us all!" said Morton.

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