

BY NEAL BARRETT, JR.

The Stentorii Luggage

Rule 1 for interstellar hotel keepers: If a guest calls Room Service for a snack, he may mean the keys to his neighbor's room!

Illustrated by WOOD





THE Double-A call light wailed and blinked itself into a bright red hemorrhage on the wall. I woke up fast. My first thought was fire. Logically, reasonably, I know there hasn't been a hotel fire in 800 years — but tradition is tradition.

I punched the visor and Greel's face popped on the screen. The lobby clock over his shoulder read 3:35. I moaned silently and flipped on vocal.

"Duncan here."

"Chief, get down here quick." I didn't ask why. Greel's my head bellhop and bellhops can smell hotel trouble.

"Where are you?"

"Level 12. Desk 19."

"Check. Hold everything, kid." I started to cut off, then I saw something else behind him. I took a deep breath and held it.

"Greel. Is that — Ollie?" Greel nodded. Like he was going to be sick. I was in my clothes and out the door. I took a manual emergency lift and fell seventy-eight floors in eighty seconds, not even thinking about my stomach. Not with Ollie to think about.

Ollie's uncle is Mike Sorrenson, owner of Hotel Intergalactica, and a reasonably decent person. Ollie is something else again. Crewcut, eager, bowtie and fresh out of college. My job — teach him "all there is to know about the hotel business." Which should be a real snap,

as he already knows all there is to know about everything.

Thursday, for instance. Ollie got his menus mixed and served scrambled eggs to five hundred visiting Vegans. That's all. No trouble. Except the difference between a Vegan and a chicken is strictly a matter of size and evolution — and we're still cleaning up Ballroom Nine.

I CAME out of the lift, my stomach only ten floors behind. Ollie popped out of his chair and came toward me, a sick smile pasted across his face.

"Mr. Duncan, I—"

"Sit down, Ollie, and shut up," I said quietly. He swallowed and sat down.

I turned to Greel.

"Okay," I said. "I'm ready. Let's have it."

"I'll save the details for later," said Greel. "We've got to get moving. Fast. I have reason to believe there are from four to fifty Skeidzti loose in the hotel."

I drew a blank at first. Then it hit me and I felt cold all over.

"Oh, my God," I said, sending a withering look at Ollie.

"Uh-huh." Greel nodded. "The way I get it from Ollie, four Stentorii checked in about 3:00. They wanted to go right up to their room so Ollie sent a boy with them and told the Stentorii he'd put their luggage in a lift right away."

"They kind of grinned at me, Mr. Duncan," Ollie interrupted, "and said that was fine, there was no hurry about the bags."

"Yeah, I'll bet they did," I said. I looked at Greel, and we both felt sick. "Don't tell me the rest. Ollie checked them in on the Master Register, turned to get their bags — and what-do-you-know, they were gone."

Ollie looked surprised. He started to ask how I could possibly know but I glared him back to his chair.

"Okay," I said. "What have you done so far?" Greel took a deep breath.

"First, they have about thirty to thirty-five minutes head start. I've shielded four levels above and below. I don't think they'll get that far, but no use taking chances. We've got one lucky break. Since the whole Quadrant borders on Free City they can't get out except through a Registration area."

"What about—"

Greel nodded. "Already done it. I've closed all five Desks in the Quadrant. Anyone wants to register has to come in by way of Seven."

"Fine. Just one thing—" I flipped through the register. "Could they have gotten outside through this door?"

"No. It was unshielded, all right. But there were no checkouts after the Stentorii registered."

OUR luck was holding. At least the Skeidzti were still just the hotel's problem. I've got a few friends on Free City's revolving council, but I don't like to mess with those boys unless I have to.

I sent Greel to organize the bell-boys into search squads. Then I checked the Stentorii's room number and hauled Ollie out of his chair, figuring the only way to make sure he stayed out of trouble was to keep him with me. Before I left the lobby I picked up a pair of low-charge stunners and handed one to Ollie.

"Look," I said, "do you think you could possibly handle one of these things without knocking us both out cold?"

Ollie nodded vaguely. He took the weapon and held it as if he were certain it would go off in his hand.

"Sure, Mr. Duncan, but why do we need weapons? I mean, I'm sorry I let those things get loose, but—"

I stopped at the lift and stared at him. I suddenly realized the poor kid had no idea what he had done wrong. All he could see was that Greel and I were making a big fuss over a couple of alien housepets.

"Ollie," I said patiently, "do you really know what a Skeidzti is? I don't want an oration. Just tell me the simple truth. Do you or don't you?" He started to say something, then changed his mind and shook his head.

"I thought so. Well, first of all, don't refer to them as 'pets.' They may be cute as a kitten to a Stentorii, but as far as you're concerned they are dangerous, quick, carnivorous, highly adaptable little monsters. Only 'adaptable' is about as descriptive as calling the ocean moist. A Skeidzti in a kitchen will hide in a stack of plates and, by God, you'll eat off of him and swear he is a plate. A Skeidzti in a garden is a rock, a weed, a pile of leaves. In your bedroom he's a garter, a sock or a necktie. Only — put one around your neck and you'll damn well know he's not a necktie. Now do you think it might be permissible for me to continue to bear arms against the Skeidzti, just in case?"

Ollie was taken aback, I could tell. Almost enough to keep his mouth shut. He thought for maybe a full second before he said anything.

"But Mr. Duncan, if the Stentorii knew they were dangerous —" And that did it. I poked a hard finger in his chest and backed him against the wall.

"Look, Ollie," I said grimly, "that college line of logic is what got us into this jam in the first place. Now get this, and remember it. You don't need a degree in Alien Psychology to know that Rule One is *never* use your own viewpoint as a premise in guessing what an alien is thinking or doing. It just simply

doesn't work that way. An alien's actions are based upon what he thinks is reasonable and proper — not what you think he ought to think.

"Why do you think we have separate Quadrants and private entrances to each room? It sure as hell isn't for economy's sake, I can tell you that. It so happens that some of these so-called reasonable civilized beings still consider each other as rare culinary delights. While that sort of nonsense is SOP in Free City, this hotel is strictly out of bounds. And here's another rule you can put down in Duncan's lectures on Alien Psychology: If a guest phones down for a midnight snack, he may mean he wants the key to his neighbor's room." I took a deep breath.

"Am I getting through to you, Ollie?" Ollie nodded, wide-eyed, and I shoved him into the lift ahead of me. We hung for a moment, then the gravs caught hold.

IN my business you learn to get along with aliens, or at least put up with the ones you can't possibly get along with. And some are completely impossible — like the Nixies. Except for simple trade relations, I can't conceive of anything I might have in common with a Nixie.

And there was another rule of thumb for Ollie: Never be deceived by appearances. An alien's

resemblance to human form is no indication that his outlook will in any way resemble human logic and reason. Until you know, don't guess; and don't assume, either, that a lack of human form denotes a lack of common interest. A Goron is a repulsive, warty glob of pink and brown protoplasm consisting of twelve eyes, nine pseudoarms—and an entirely human liking for jazz, poetry, Scotch and women. Or anyway, Goron females.

On the other hand, ignoring the general hairiness and the rodent-like features, a Stentorii looks as humanoid as I do. He is also a completely alien, cold-blooded, murderous creature without a shred of mercy in his body.

I stared hard at the Stentorii who opened the door. He stared back at me from tiny red eyes set wide on either side of his whiskery pink muzzle. Then he saw Ollie and gave a high squeaky laugh, baring a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth. He turned into his room and said something in Stentor to his companions. They nearly fell apart.

I had had just about enough. Time was running out. I switched on my portable recorder and said:

"According to Statute XII, Galactic Standard Code, I wish to invoke the privilege of communicating with you; without fear of future prosecution in case I may offend, by way of accidental implication, any tradition, custom or moral

standard of your race." The Stentorii just grinned. I spoke a little louder. "I said I speak without offense!"

The Stentorii frowned. He didn't like that at all. But he understood it.

"All right," he said grudgingly, "I accept."

"Fine," I said, and let him see that I had switched off my recorder. I never start an argument with an alien without invoking the non-offense clause. Of course, the same clause is stated in every Registration Contract, providing mutual protection for the hotel's guests and its employees. But I like to play it safe.

By now the three other Stentorii were up, grinning at Ollie. I ignored them and spoke to the one at the door.

"My name is Duncan," I told him. "I am manager of the hotel. This is my assistant, Mr. Sorrenson. I will come right to the point. You played a little joke down in the lobby a few minutes ago. Although this incident is a serious breach of your Registration Contract, I am willing to forget the matter if I am able to gain your full cooperation. On behalf of Hotel Intergalactica, I formally request you recall your Skeidzti immediately and turn them over to me for housing in the hotel kennel."

The Stentorii glanced at his companions, then turned to me with

a look of mock astonishment.

"Mr. Duncan, do you imply the hotel has allowed my pets to become lost? Naturally, I will hold you responsible if they come to any harm while in your charge." I had half expected something like this. I couldn't do a thing but play it out.

"All right," I said, "I haven't time to appreciate your humor. You know it is illegal to bring unregistered alien pets into this hotel. I am also certain you are aware that we are in the Federation Circle, which is *not* in Free City territory — which means all guests, by the act of signing their Registration Contracts, place themselves under Federation law for the duration of their stay here."

THE Stentorii grinned, showing his yellow teeth.

"Mr. Duncan, you are bluffing. I am quite aware of the law, and respectfully submit that if you check your copy of our Registration Contracts you will find your employee here countersigned the Alien Responsibility Clause."

Well, that was his round. I was sure he was too oily a character to fall for it, but I had had to try. He was right. Under our Registration Contract it is presumed that while the hotel is responsible for a full knowledge of the Galactic Customs Restrictions, an alien cannot be expected to inform the Desk Clerk of all possible violations he may be

guilty of on any particular world. And any clerk green enough, or stupid enough, or both — like Ollie — who signs a Responsibility Clause without checking Galactic Customs — ought to have his head examined. Of course, we could take the Stentorii to court. Maybe we might even win, on the grounds of purposeful malice, but I don't like to get the hotel into law suits. It's bad publicity, and it gives other wise guys grand ideas.

The legal pitch having failed, I was ready to continue with Unveiled Threat No. 1.

"Look," I said wearily, "I admit you are within your legal rights. Although just how far within I'm not too certain at the moment. But before you come to any decision let me remind you that, while I may not be in a position to take official action against you, I fully intend to file a Warning Report to every member of the Galactic Hotel Association, which includes nearly twelve million first-class hotels and their subsidiaries. I don't know what your business is. But since you are here I presume it entails traveling. Traveling means hotels. If you refuse your cooperation, I assure you it may be quite difficult to find a decent room within twelve thousand parsecs of this planet."

The Stentorii shrugged and closed the door on my foot. I'm sure he would have hacked it off for a souvenir if I hadn't jerked it out.

I looked at Ollie. His fists were clenched by his side and there was a look of iron determination in his eyes.

"Well?" I said.

"Boy," said Ollie. "Just wait until they try to check into a GHA hotel again."

"Ollie," I said weakly, "I didn't come up here to actually accomplish anything with those characters. It is strictly a matter of form. A necessary routine for the record. Everything I said went completely down the drain. They were not impressed, frightened or embarrassed in any way. It is impossible to reason with a Stentorii because he is inherently incapable of taking anything you say seriously. He is also incapable of caring whether he gets a hotel room. Anywhere. Ever. He has one now, and the future is absolutely of no importance. He doesn't care about you, me, life, death or hotel rooms. Didn't you hear anything I said in the lift?"

"Sure, Mr. Duncan, but—"

"Ollie. Shut up."

I DITCHED Ollie and stopped off at my office for a wake-up pill. Greel had his command post set up in the Level 12 lobby and I joined him there. The lobby was full of squat Fensi bellhops, swarming in and out of the lifts like agitated ants.

Most of my bellhops and some of the Administrative staff are Fen-

si. I like to have them on the payroll, and I'd hire fifty more if I could get them. Fensi are quick, alert, reasonably honest and highly adaptable. Their adaptability alone makes them worth their weight in gold to a big hotel. A Fensi can breathe a wide variety of atmospheres, take plenty of G's, and doesn't care whether he's hot, cold or in-between. Unless you're a Fensi, room service around here can be a literally killing job.

Greel sprinted across the lobby, a wide smile stretching over his hairless blue face.

"I'm glad you're so happy," I said. "Maybe you should have gone to see our friends upstairs."

Greel laughed. "Maybe we won't need 'em, chief. The boys think we can clean the Skeidzti out by morning — with a little luck, of course."

"More than a little, if you ask me. Get any yet?"

Greel held up a finger. "One. Skorno picked up an ashtray on Ten and it nearly bit his hand off." He nodded toward the desk and Ollie and I followed. He picked up a small stationery box and pushed it toward me.

"Skorno got it before it could change completely — you can see what it was trying to do."

I could. The object in the box was a dead Skeidzti, but only one-quarter of it was in its natural form. The last thing it had touched was Skorno's hand. Following its blind-

rule instinct it had imitated a hairless blue Fensi arm nearly up to the elbow, before it had either run out of material or died.

Now that it was dead it was slowly changing back to its natural form. The part we could see resembled a thin, eight-inch-wide worm-like creature with stubby serrated legs. I figured it could move about as fast a caterpillar without adapting. It was a highly vulnerable creature, and in order to survive it had developed a high degree of protective camouflage. With its soft body and slow speed almost anything could pick up a quick and easy meal. And its natural color didn't help at all. The dead quarter of the Skeidzti was a brilliant, almost phosphorescent orange.

"Well, son, get some idea what we're up against?" Ollie's eyes were glued to the box and his face was as blue as Greel's.

"Can they — can they adapt to *anything*?"

"No," said Greel, "they have limitations. I'm sure they can *imitate* most anything, but they couldn't change as quickly under six or eight G's, or, say, in a methane atmosphere."

"Not for two or three generations, anyway," I added soberly. Greel nodded.

"Anyway, Ollie, the point is these varmints are already used to a Stentor-Earth atmosphere. And if any get out—"

"It would be comparable," I added, "to a plague of invisible bobcats."

I THINK for the first time Ollie was hit with the seriousness of our problem. I could sense a kind of helpless panic in his eyes, as if he had suddenly realized he'd opened the floodgates and let the valve break off in his hand.

"Mr. Duncan, I — well, maybe we ought to get help. I mean — I'll take the blame — and — and —" He was shaking like a leaf. I eased him down to a chair.

"And just what sort of help did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Well, the police! Couldn't you—"

I shook my head firmly. "No. I certainly could not. That, my friend, is all we need. The Federation would quarantine the hotel, rout several thousand guests out of their various notions of sleep, and raise enough hell to wake every DeepDream addict from here to Andromeda."

"Aside from the fact," Greel added, "that every Skeidzti in the hotel could hitch a free ride out of here in some cop's pocket."

"Right. No, we can handle it ourselves, a hell of a lot quieter. We've had worse before." Ollie's face told me he thought I was an out and out liar. But then, like I said, this kid has a lot to learn about the hotel business.

The Skeidzti had been loose in the hotel since 3:00 a.m. By 5:30 we had killed eight of them. And eight Fensi bellhops had bandaged hands.

It was obvious we couldn't go around touching everything in the hotel to see if it was real or Skeidzti. Added was the problem of knowing *when* we had killed them all. The Skeidzti came in disguised as four pieces of Stentorii luggage, but we had no idea how many had clustered together to form each piece. And the Stentorii weren't telling.

I called Greel and Ollie to the Desk for a strategy meeting. Ollie dropped in a chair and sank into brooding silence. Even Greel's customary optimism seemed to have temporarily vanished. He reported the bellhops were doing their poking with sticks now, but the results were still alarmingly low.

"What we need," Greel complained, "is a system."

"Yeh, we need a system, all right," added Ollie helpfully. I stood up, paced around the Desk. The strategy meeting was dying on its feet.

"Look," I said, "let's analyze it. Our problem is to get rid of the Skeidzti, right?"

"Right," from Greel and Ollie.

"Okay. Now to kill them we have to see them. And by seeing them I mean we have to see them as they really are."



"Or catch them during a change," added Greel.

"Exactly." Somewhere in the back of my head an idea was catching hold. I kept talking, trying to push it out.

"Then our problem is this. We have to force them to change into something we can recognize as a definite Skeidzti." Greel's frown vanished. He sat up straight in his chair.

"You mean, like if we made them all change into an object we knew we only had one of."

"Sort of like that. Only that means we'd have to be able to isolate the Skeidzti in a specified area—and even if we could do that it'd be a hell of a problem to get rid of all the objects we didn't want them to imitate. Which means more stick poking. Remember, they can flatten out on the walls and ceiling just as easily as they can curl up like an ashtray or a sofa pillow." Greel's face dropped back into a disappointed frown.

"No, you've got the general idea," I said quickly. "But I think I've got a way to work the same thing, only quicker." Greel suddenly looked around, and I turned and saw Skorno, our first casualty, coming out of the lift. In his bandaged hand he held an ominous looking club, and in the other a limp and bloody throwrug. He stopped before us, grinning, and tossed the rug on the floor.

HE said, "Three more, chief." I bent down for a closer look. This time, three Skeidzti had joined to imitate a portion of the rug. It was a near-perfect job. They had continued the intricate pattern, carrying out the design exactly where the real rug stopped. The only thing wrong, Skorno explained, was that he passed the rug fifty times a day and knew it was about twice as large as it should have been.

Something about Skorno's rug worried me. I asked him how long he thought it took for the Skeidzti to change from one form to another.

"About half a second," he said. "But I think it varies, depending on what they're imitating."

"For instance?"

"Well, on a plain surface, like a wall or something, they're faster—much faster."

"You mean," I asked, "if they have something more complicated to imitate, it takes longer?" Skorno shook his head.

"I wish it did. When I said it varies, I meant just the first few times. Once they've imitated something, they don't forget it."

"Well, hell," I snapped, "I know they can't imitate simultaneously! There has to be some definite minimum time lapse!" Skorno spread his hands helplessly.

"I know, chief. But whatever it is, it's too small to do us much good. They're just too fast for our

reaction time. We still only get about one out of every ten we see." Swell, I thought. If they were too fast for the Fensi, we were really up the creek.

"What about spraying a low-charge disrupter all over the place and picking up the pieces?" said Greel hopefully.

Skorno said, "I forgot to mention that with a low-charge you have to hit them in just the right place or they're only knocked out for awhile."

"And while they're unconscious they're just as safe as ever," I finished for him. Then Skorno's words suddenly sank in. "Good Lord! Do you mean you're using *high-charge* disruptors—inside this hotel!"

Skorno nodded sheepishly. "What else can we do, chief? Sure, the place looks like a two-cluster cruiser plowed through. But we're getting 'em, slow but sure."

I was beginning to get a little bit mad. I thought about the Stentorii, sleeping peacefully in their rooms while we blasted four levels of valuable real estate looking for their damnable pets. And what, I asked myself, are we doing about it? Mooning around in the lobby on our respective rears, that's what we are doing. I stood up again, glaring at Ollie on general principles.

"All right," I said firmly. "This has gone far enough, gentlemen. I'm not saying there *is* any other

way to finish off this mess, but I do have one humble idea that might save a little of Hotel Intergalactica's property. I figure as long as we're going to turn this place into a shooting gallery we might as well have something to shoot at."

I went over our floor plan with Greel and Skorno and picked out an area where the Skeidzti had proven particularly obnoxious. Then I sent Greel to seal off the other contaminated levels, and told Skorno to marshal his forces in Humanoid Hall. I picked Humanoid Hall for two reasons: One, plenty of Skeidzti to work on, and two, a minimum of furniture. For previously stated reasons I kept Ollie with me, and hopped a Class-A lift for Level Eight.

MORE than once I've had good reason to be thankful we enforce strong lift security measures. No matter where the Skeidzti might go, I was dead sure they would never reach guest quarters.

There's a good reason for this. We ordinarily house about thirty thousand guests in the hotel at any one time. That number represents five to fifteen thousand separate races, each one requiring its own unique set of conditions. In Quadrant Four I've got Denebian Iceworms at -200 F. right "next door" to a cluster of Calistan Feroids sleeping soundly in boiling mercury. No problem. We can handle

1,240 different atmospheres, with innumerable variations in density, temperature and lighting.

The real problem is sociological, not mechanical. If the Galaxy is old, the oldest thing in it are its grudges. To put it bluntly, some of these characters have hated each other's guts so long they forgot *why* about two million years ago.

Naturally, an Altaran isn't going to walk into a Vegan's room and strangle him. There's a problem of about 900 degrees and thirty G's to overcome first. But that's no real problem either — about 500,000 years ago they swarmed all over each other's planets in protective armor, and strangling was the nicest thing that happened.

And that's where we come in.

What they do outside Hotel Intergalactica is none of our business — but inside we make sure no one is faced with temptation. That's why our room segregation is vertical instead of horizontal. The hotel is built on the hive principle. Each cell or room has a private entrance bordering on the lift. There are no halls or corridors to wander around in, and any connecting rooms connect up and down. No exceptions.

It's a necessary rule and we enforce it. There are plenty of Common Rooms on the opposite side of the lifts for conferences and amiable gatherings—free of charge.

We work it that way for economical reasons, too. It's a lot easier

to, say, keep a gravitic lift at 9G constant for a Cygnian than to change it to forty-five for a Lyri passenger. Everybody minds their own business — and nobody waits for an elevator.

That's where lift security comes in.

We run a high density force-shield over each lift entrance. Try to enter one that's not attuned to your requirements and you run smack into an invisible wall. Which is precisely what would happen if the Skeidzti tried it. Imitation is one thing. Fortunately, duplication is another.

It suddenly dawned on me that here was the real reason the Stentorii played their little joke on Ollie. They knew the Skeidzti couldn't get by the lift shields, so they didn't even try. A typical bit of Stentorii humor, I thought wryly. Don't dump your problems just anywhere — toss 'em where they can do some good.

I KNEW pretty well what to expect on Level Eight.

It was worse.

What did Skorno say? Like a two-cluster cruiser plowed through? It was more like a complete reenactment of the Battle of the Rim.

Through a low cloud of acrid blue smoke I made out the dim outlines of Fensi bellhops, lined up in military order across the room.

Skorno groped toward me through the wreckage. I put a handkerchief to my nose and stumbled out to meet him, Ollie choking along behind. The air was full of the smell of fused plastic, burnt carpeting and a particularly nauseous odor I identified as fried Skeidzti.

"Are you sure there's *anything* left alive up here?" I asked. Skorno nodded, breathing in the poisonous atmosphere like fresh country air.

"Sure, chief, they're here all right. You just can't see 'em." He nodded toward the ready Fensi crew. "We're all here, I think. What next?"

"Nothing," I choked, "until this smoke clears away. What happened to the air conditioning?"

"Greel's working on it. We had to block off some of the vents. Grid's not fine enough to keep out a Skeidzti." I looked up. The air was already beginning to clear. I gave it a few more minutes, then stepped up on a scorched sofa. I was anxious to get started so I cut it as short as possible. The idea, I explained, was to take advantage of the fact that there was a lapse, however small it might be, between the time a Skeidzti could change from one form to another. Catch them in that stage, and we had 'em. Simple as that, if it worked.

I lined the Fensi in a crude circle in the center of the room, facing outwards. Then I pulled some debris together for a shield, jerked

Ollie down behind it and dimmed the lights. Dimmed them — not turned them off. The idea was to force the Skeidzti to adapt to new lighting conditions, and I was afraid if I turned them off altogether they'd sense they were safe in the absolute darkness and not adapt at all.

I gave them plenty of time, dimming the lights slowly until I could hardly tell they were on at all. Then I pressed the switch for maximum brightness and the room was flooded with brilliant light.

And there they were. They were fast, but not faster than the speed of light. For nearly a full second they stood out like ink spots on a clean white sheet, and we poured it on 'em. They were stunned perhaps a quarter-second past their normal reaction time. The Fensi are fast anyway, and that quarter-second margin was all they needed. We went through the routine three more times, then had to wait for the smoke to clear. We had killed thirty-seven Skeidzti.

Fine. But it gave me something to think about.

We had estimated there were at most fifty or sixty Skeidzti loose—and if we had killed thirty-seven on one level, in one room — how many did that mean were left? I mentioned it to Greel. He shrugged it off with typical Fensi optimism.

"What difference does it make, chief? We've got 'em on the run!"

"Sure," I said cautiously, "we've got 'em on the run now, all right." Both Greel and Skorno were grinning from ear to ear, having the time of their lives.

But I wasn't sure at all. Something kept asking me how long it would be before the Skeidzti caught on to the system — and whether we could come up fast enough with something to meet them. Before I left I gave explicit instructions to keep all isolation shields up — even after they were sure a room was clean. Greel gave a resigned shrug. I could tell they both thought the old man was taking the sport of Skeidzti hunting entirely too seriously.

Back in the lobby I sank into a chair and lit a cigarette. Ollie brought coffee, and we stared bleary-eyed at each other for half an hour. Ollie obviously didn't feel like talking and I was too damn tired to chew him out anymore. I could tell he was giving it to himself pretty hard anyway. That was probably doing more good than anything I could say.

POOOR Ollie! If nothing else, one night of crisis at Hotel Inter-galactica had rubbed off a considerable amount of shiny college exterior. His perfectly trimmed hair was caked with ceiling plaster. His neat bow tie dangled from his neck like last night's lettuce, and somehow he had managed to

crack one side of his gold-rimmed glasses. He was beginning to look exactly like what he was supposed to be — a harried night clerk, who wished to hell he could remember why he had ever thought of going into the hotel business.

At 7:20 I located my army on the intercom. They had finished Eight, Nine and Ten, and were mopping up on Eleven. I told Greel to split his crew and send half up to Thirteen. We gulped the last of our coffee and headed down to Eleven.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Eleven wasn't nearly as bad as Eight. Either the Fensi had improved their marksmanship or the light trick was cutting out a lot of random shooting. Greel walked up, holstering his weapon.

"Well," I asked, "what do you think?"

"I think we just may survive the night," he said tiredly. "I'm going to try one more go-around here, then move up to Twelve."

"I have purposely been avoiding that thought," I said dryly, picturing the grinning Fensi horde blasting through my expensive lobby. "And of course," I added casually, "we haven't really seen any Skeidzti in the lobby, Greel. It may be that — ah —" Greel shot me a suspicious glance and I shut up. So who needs a lobby?

Greel reloaded his disruptor — a little too eagerly, I thought — and leaned against the wall.

"Actually," he said, "I don't picture it being too bad on Twelve."

"You don't, huh?" I said doubtfully.

"No, I mean it, chief. Funny thing, they were as thick as flies on Eight and Nine, but on Ten, and here on Eleven — they seem to be sort of thinning out." I raised an eyebrow at that.

"I don't suppose there could be a leaky shield, somewhere, or they might be catching on to that light trick."

"Oh, no," Greel insisted, "we're getting them all. They're just not as thick as all. I figure when they got loose on Twelve they all high-tailed it down to the lower floors for some reason, maybe to make—"

I grabbed Greel's arm and squeezed it hard. Something he had said suddenly sent a cold chill down my neck. Greel looked puzzled. I motioned him and Ollie to a quiet corner of the room, then turned to Greel.

"Did you send half your crew up to Thirteen?" I asked carefully.

Greel shrugged. "Sure, chief. You said—"

"Okay. Now think. I want to know exactly how many men you had here — *before* you split the crew." Greel thought.

"Forty-eight."

"Exactly forty-eight?"

"Exactly. I'm sure because it's the whole night shift for the Quadrant and everyone's on duty."

"Mr. Duncan," said Ollie, "what are you —"

I cut him off sharply. "Hold it, Ollie. Whatever it is can wait." I turned back to Greel. "Then if you split your crew, we should have twenty-four men in this room. Right?" Greel nodded. He started to speak, gave me a puzzled frown instead. He turned and carefully counted his crew.

"Oh, my God!" he said.

"I get thirty-six," I told him. "Ollie?" Ollie nodded, wide-eyed. I felt Greel stiffen beside me. I looked, and his hand was sliding toward his holster.

"Hold it," I said. "There's one way to make sure."

I checked on the intercom with Skorno on thirteen. Skorno counted twenty-four men. I nodded to Greel and Ollie.

I HAD wondered what the Skeidzti would come up with to counter our move. Now I knew. They had done the only thing they could do. They had imitated the most common thing in the room, the only thing that wasn't being blasted to shreds by the disruptors: the Fensi themselves.

I walked quickly to the center of the room.

"Attention, everyone," I yelled. "Line up against the wall, quick!" I watched them carefully, getting dizzy trying to spot the phonies.

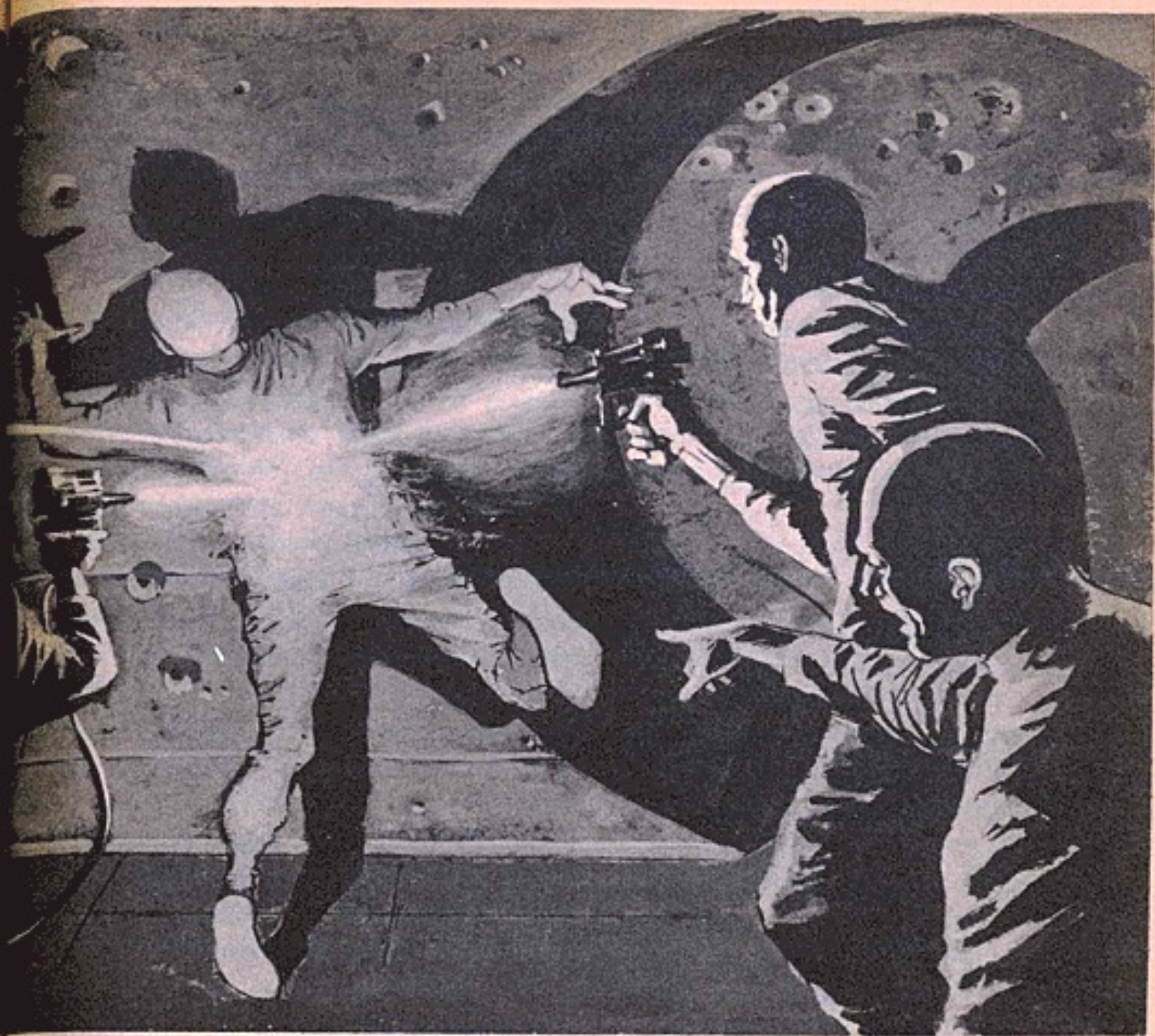
"I'm going to tell you this once,"



I said. "Listen, and get it right!" I told them right off that twelve of them were fakes. They caught on fast, knowing better than anyone what the Skeidzti were capable of. I wasn't worried about warning the Skeidzti. Whatever they were, they were no more intelligent than a well-trained dog.

"There is going to be some shooting," I said. "Ignore it and do exactly as I say." I paused, and Ollie and Greel drew their weapons.

"All right, first man. When I say go, walk to the lift and drop to Ten. Go!" The first Fensi walked to the lift and disappeared.



"Second man, go!"

"Third man, go!" The third Fensi walked to the lift, exactly like the first two. Only that was as far as he could go.

Ollie, Greel and I burned him before he could change.

Then it happened. The Skeidzti sensed something wrong. Eleven

fakes suddenly bolted for the lift. The real Fensi ignored my order and joined the shooting. I yelled but no one could hear me.

Suddenly the whole area about the lift erupted in blinding blue flame. I shielded my face and felt a sharp pain in my side as the floor came up to meet me.

Greel was on his feet first. I shook my head and limped over to him. There was a large jagged hole in the wall and I knew right away what it was, even before I saw the tangled mass of fused wire and metal. I picked up a hunk of carpet and tossed it down the lift. Then I went limp all over.

The carpet went down the lift as smooth as any living thing. The shields were down. The Skeidzti had the run of the whole Quadrant.

Greel was giving his crew a royal chewing out. I cut him off and ordered the Fensi to Level Twelve, on the double. It was too damn late for chewing out now. We were in real trouble. I looked around for Ollie. He was gone. I cursed myself and kicked a piece of furniture halfway across the room. That's all I needed — the Skeidzti and Ollie running loose.

"Greel! Check the inner shields, see if we've still got *anything* sealed off in this place!"

"I did. So far as I can tell it's just the lift."

"That's bad enough," I said grimly. "On this side of the lift they're open to anything one room deep. And on the other side, the first guest who steps out of his room will—" Greel shook his head violently. I brightened, suddenly remembering. We had already sealed the guest side and I knew the two sides were controlled sep-

arately. Unless something else happened, we still had them sealed into the lift with access restricted to the Common Rooms, kitchens and ballrooms. They were still within the Quadrant, and away from the guests.

"**A**LL right," I said as calmly as possible, "we start over. It means maybe eighty floors of isolation, and they won't fall for that light trick again. We'll have to escort every guest through the lift and arrange for alternate dining areas. And I want every Fensi tested through a shield that's working. I don't think they'll try that again, but—"

The intercom crackled and Skorno's voice came on high and frantic.

"Chief! Listen, that crazy kid has opened the shields! He broke into Central Control and let down every barrier in the Quadrant!"

"*What!* Why in — look, it may be too late but try to get the damn things up again. Quick!"

Skorno moaned. "I can't. He's fused the controls! I can't even *find* the cut-off switch!" I felt a sharp pain in my mouth and realized I was trying to bite my tongue off. If I ever got my hands on that kid—

"Listen, Skorno, find him! I don't care what you do to him, just find him!"

"I can't figure it," moaned Greel.

"He must have gone completely off his rocker."

"He had better be off his rocker," I said grimly. "That's the only thing that's going to save him from me." The intercom sputtered again. Ollie. Somehow, I knew before he even spoke.

"Mr. Duncan, listen, I had to do it. I couldn't tell you because I knew you'd—"

"Listen, you little punk —" growled Greel. I frowned and shook my head.

"Ollie," I said gently, "this is Mr. Duncan. I understand. I'm not angry. Not at all. Now listen, Ollie. I know you're not feeling well. You're tired, Ollie. Tell us where you are and we'll come and get you — help you, I mean—"

"Listen," Ollie said angrily, "I'm not crazy. Now pay attention and do what I say — exactly!" I swallowed. He was gone, all right.

"Yes, Ollie. We're listening. Go ahead."

His voice relaxed. "I'm on Eighteen. The Crystal Ballroom." I swallowed again. My beautiful new ballroom.

"Come up through the loading entrance," Ollie went on. "You'll enter at Lift, ah — Forty-five, Humanoid Kitchen annex."

"Yes, Ollie. We'll do that."

"And Mr. Duncan—"

"Yes, Ollie?"

"This is not a threat, sir. But don't bring any weapons."

"Oh—" The intercom went dead. Ollie was through talking.

"Well?" said Greel.

"Well what?" I snapped. "Do you want to flush him out of there?"

Greel shrugged. "Lift Forty-five is this way, chief."

OLLIE let us into the kitchen. The smell nearly knocked us back into the lift.

"Gahhhh! What is it, Ollie!"

"Ghayschi stew," he said. "Pretty horrible, isn't it? Here. Wear these." He tossed me a box and I quickly jammed two of the Chef's Little Wonder Air Filters into my nose and passed the box to Greel. Ghayschi stew, I thought. The kid has really flipped.

"Ollie—" Then I stopped. He was evidently not kidding. His eyes were a little too bright and his face was wet and glistening. Also, he had a disruptor in his hand.

"It's on low charge," he said, "but I don't want to knock anybody out, Mr. Duncan. I got us into this mess and I've got to get us out — my own way." He paused. "Now," he said, "will you give me a hand with this pot?" I shot him a skeptical glance.

"Why? Where are we taking it?" Ollie tensed.

"Mr. Duncan," he pleaded, "you've got to trust me!"

"Trust you! You've wrecked my hotel, let those infernal pests loose, and you — you stand there with a gun in your hand and ask me to trust you? Move the damn pot yourself!" Ollie seemed to think a minute, then a hurt expression spread over his face.

"All right," he said calmly. "If I give you the gun, will you help me? You said yourself the hotel is wrecked. Why not give me a chance?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Okay, Ollie. Give me the gun." Ollie handed me the disruptor. Greel started to move and I motioned him back. Ollie was right. I really had absolutely nothing to lose.

I grabbed one end of the pot.

"This way," said Ollie, shoving open the door to the ballroom.

"Here?" Ollie nodded.

The Crystal Ballroom is new, and I'm proud of it. The floor is imported Denebian seaglass and the walls are Serinese protomurals. When the murals are on and the floor is lit, there isn't a hotel in the system that can touch it. I cringed as we set the large pot of Ghayschi stew square in the middle of the seaglass floor.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we get out of here. Quick." I followed him back to the kitchen. Behind him he trailed a long, thin

wire. One end was attached to the top of the pot. Greel and I watched in silent wonder as he pulled the wire through the kitchen and into a tiny room off the kitchen pantry.

I knew where we were; it was the light control booth for the seaglass floor. I had shown it to Ollie several days before.

Ollie seated himself at the control board and began to play the lights. Through a small window I could see the ballroom, and the huge pot of Ghayschi stew. The floor began to glow, pulsing from gold to blue to green and back again. Ollie experimented a while, then seemed to be satisfied.

"Now," he said finally, without turning away from the controls, "we are ready." I raised an eyebrow at Greel. Both of us were wondering just exactly what we were ready for.

"Fortunately," said Ollie, "the ballroom itself doesn't border directly onto one of the unshielded lifts. The anteroom shield is still up, though. And now—" he pressed a button by his chair—"it's down." Greel and I exchanged another look.

"Next," said Ollie suddenly, "dinnertime."

I shut my eyes. Ollie jerked his wire. The pot tipped and the gray and brown viscous mess of Ghayschi stew spread slowly across the ballroom floor.

"Now what?" I asked cautiously.

"Now we wait. I've turned on the auxiliary blowers. The smell is spreading through the Skeidzti occupied areas." I had a few choice comments on this move, but I kept them to myself. This was Ollie's party. I figured I could always strangle him later.

We waited ten minutes.

Then Ollie suddenly went into action. His hands swept over the light control board and the sea-glass floor danced and pulsed with shifting colors, shifting faster and faster through the spectrum. I watched Ollie's face. His skin was tight and great beads of sweat poured from his forehead down his neck. Then the tense mask suddenly broke and a wide grin spread over his face.

"Look!" he yelled, nodding toward the floor.

I looked. At first there was nothing to see. Then I rubbed my eyes. The fast-changing lights must have affected my vision because the whole floor seemed alive with bright orange spots.

Then it hit me. *Skeidzti!* The floor around the stew was crowded three deep with them — and they were all changing back to their natural form!

We watched for an hour and a half. Finally Ollie jerked a lever and the colors faded away. He sank weakly back in his chair. I felt cold all over, and suddenly

realized I was soaking wet. Later, we counted two hundred seventy-nine dead Skeidzti on the ballroom floor.

It was all over.

I HAD plenty of questions but I saved them until after breakfast. Some of it I could figure out, but I still didn't know how Ollie had been sure the Skeidzti would eat his infernal stew.

"Oh, I knew they'd like it," said Ollie. "Ghayschi stew is a favorite Stentorii dish. I looked it up. I figured the Skeidzti ate table scraps."

"That I can guess," I said. "But when they couldn't keep up with the changing lights why didn't they stop eating? Were they too stupid to know they either had to give up a meal or die?"

"No," said Ollie, "not stupid. They just couldn't help themselves. I figured any animal that could adapt so quickly and move around so fast was bound to have a pretty high metabolism. Any animal like that has to eat, oh, maybe six or eight times his weight in food every day or starve to death. They came into the hotel at 3:00. When I turned on the lights upstairs it was nearly ten o'clock. After seven hours they *had* to eat. There was nothing in the world that could have stopped them." Ollie paused, sipped his coffee.

"They finally adjusted to your light trick because they had no alternative stronger than survival. I used the same idea, but this time they had to make an impossible choice between two basic instincts."

"And they couldn't," I added. "So to avoid it they sort of, what—died of a nervous breakdown?"

"Something like that. In school there was this thing about some old experiments where a chicken or a rat was trained to certain responses, then the responses were mixed or taken away and —"

I yawned and got up to leave. "Sure, Ollie," I said. "Let's be sure and talk about it some time." I started for the door.

"Mr. Duncan—?"

"Yes?"

"Am I fired?"

I thought a minute. I was so tired I could hardly hear him.

"No, Ollie," I said wearily. "I don't think so. There's just one thing, though."

"Sir?"

"Keep," I said sternly, "the hell out of my kitchens!"

— NEAL BARRETT, JR.

