Worm in the Woodwork

BY E. C. TUBB

It is never wise to enslave a man who is cleverer than you...

The examiner was a man of indeterminate age, his face a smooth collection of planes and curves without lines or exaggerated features. His body was slim like that of a boy but his eyes had nothing to do with youth. They were cold, impersonal, detached and, because of that, a little frightening. His name was Vernon Ewart. He was studiously polite.

"Please be seated, Professor Ludec. The chair, I trust, is comfortable? The atmosphere to your liking?" A gesture indicated that the conditioning would be adjusted if Ludec so wished. "Is there anything you require?"

"My freedom."

"Please, professor, you jest." Ewart leaned back, his hands resting easily on the surface of the desk between them, his eyes unblinking. "I take it that you fully appreciate the nature of your situation?"

Ludec did not answer.

"You are an intelligent man. As a master of extrapotential logic you must have assessed the facts of the matter. You are, to be blunt, utterly helpless." Ewart extended a package of cigarettes. "No? You surprise me. I understood that all Earthmen smoked."

"Do you smoke?"

"I am a Kindian, not an Earthman."

"You are Homo sapiens," said Ludec mildly. "Your great-great-grandparents came from Earth." He leaned back in the chair so thoughtfully provided. "Is there any point in my saying that you are wasting your time?"

"I disagree, professor."

"That is your privilege. But I am not going to help you."

"You know?"

"You mentioned my abilities—they would be small indeed if I had not guessed why I was forcibly taken and brought here. Tell me, how close are you to outright war with Earth?"

"You are the logician."

"Very close." Ludec sighed and closed his eyes. Relaxed in the big chair he seemed very small. He was old, his hair a sparse ruff of white around his pink scalp, his face graven with lines of time, experience and
character. His hands, as they rested on his knees, were very thin, the veins quite prominent. His eyes, when he opened them, belied his age. They were bright, keen, shining with shrewd intelligence.

"Very close," he repeated. "A ship of the Terran League wantonly attacked, the crew and passengers slaughtered, the ship gutted and burned, myself abducted—yes, you must be very close."

"The ship was attacked by unknown pirates," said the examiner calmly. "You, unfortunately, were destroyed with the rest of the passengers. A check of the bodies will prove that."

"Clever." Ludec shook his head. "But the blind cleverness of children. Do you really believe that the Terran League will accept such a transparent facade?"

"Does it matter?"

"I think it does. And I think that you know it does. Earth is tolerant of her bellicose children-worlds but even the tolerance of Earth has limits." His eyes drifted to the window. "A pity," he mused. "It seems to be a nice world. A kind world. It would be a shame if it were to be destroyed as an example to the rest of the Outworld Federation."

"Would it be a shame if Earth were to be destroyed as an example to the Terran League?"

The examiner was still polite, still a model of courtesy, but there was a little something in his voice, a shade of expression in his eyes which seemed to chill the air. He shrugged.

"We digress, I think. You have no need to philosophize about Kindy. You are here for only one thing."

"To help you?"

"Exactly."

"At the expense of Earth?" Ludec shook his head. "I think not."

"You will have no choice," said Ewart. He spoke with the quiet conviction of a man who entertains no possible shadow of doubt.

Even on film the shambles was sickening. As the projected images died and the lights brightened Carson glanced at his companions. Both looked grim. Ross broke the silence.

"They call themselves civilized," he said bitterly. "Yet they do a thing like that."

It was the reaction Carson had expected. He looked at Radford.

"Messy," he commented. "An inside job?"

"We don't know," said Carson. "On the face of it it seems impossible. The official explanation is that the ship was attacked by pirates."

"Pirates!" Ross snorted his contempt. "Is that the best they could do?"

"You don't believe it?" Carson turned to Radford. "Do you?"

Radford shrugged. "I suppose," he said dryly, "that it is just possible for a pirate to catch a ship just as it Twists Out, incapacitate it, board it, gut and rob it as we have just seen, but it's unlikely. My guess is that they had inside help." He lit a cigarette and idly watched the smoke
drift towards the fans. "There's really no other explanation."

It was a hard thought but one which had to be faced. Ross didn't like it. To him war was a matter of ships and men and give-and-take destruction. Something to be fought according to rules with uniforms, heroes and clean victories. War, he knew, wasn't like that but he wished it were. To Carson war was a matter of diplomacy with the threat of destruction remaining simply a threat. He could easier accept the idea of a traitor. Radford had no trouble at all in accepting it. War, to Radford, was something peculiarly nasty.

"Find who is missing," he said. "That's your traitor."

"No one is missing," said Carson. "All the bodies checked out but one."

He stilled the obvious question. "It was a switch. Superficially there were no survivors. In fact Professor Ludec is missing."

"Ludec!" Radford looked thoughtful. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. We had a trace on him—he didn't even know he carried it. A nonmetallic minuscule capsule imbedded in the trachea, powered by muscular action and radiating on a VHF band. It was planted when he came in for a pre-flight medical some time ago."

"So now we know what it was all about." Radford flicked ash from his cigarette. "Our friends, apparently, have decided to play it rough. Couldn't we have kept Ludec under wraps?"

"Hardly," said Ross. "Officially we are at peace with the Outworld Federation and didn't suspect outright action. Ludec was asked to speak at the Convention on Brude and Brude is a League planet. He wanted to go and we couldn't stop him—after all, he is a civilian and a free agent. Even so we took all precautions. Both crew and passengers were screened and I had a couple of my own men planted to keep an eye on him." Ross paused. "They were good men."

"Not good enough," said Radford. He didn't elaborate, he didn't have to. The men had failed, they were dead, the facts spoke for themselves. He looked at Ross.

"I take it that you have units in the area?"

"I have. Two strong forces patrolling the fringe of the Outworld Federation and a third actually in their territorial space."

"They protested, of course," said Carson, "but they had no choice. Pirates, after all, are a common enemy."

"They are probably using the presence of the League forces as good propaganda anyway," said Radford. "Good, that is, from their own point of view." He fell silent, musing, his heavy face lined with thought. Finally he crushed out his cigarette.

"The trouble with governments," he said, "is that when they turn crooked they go the whole way. The Outworld Federation has turned criminal. That makes them just that much more dangerous."
"They were dangerous before," said Carson.

"True, but not quite in the same way. Then they followed the rules and were limited in what they could do. Now they are using outright force—thinly disguised but criminal in every sense of the word. Well, they started it, we'll finish it."

"We?"

"My boys, the Special Agents." Radford smiled at Carson. "So perhaps you think I'm conceited well, maybe I am. But when all your soft talk fails and Ross is up against something bigger than he is, what is left?"

"I won't argue."

"Don't argue, I speak the truth and you know it. Ross slipped up on his security; he won't find that traitor but you can bet your life there was one. Some money-hungry lad or a sleeper or even a misguided patriot, who knows? The only thing certain is that he did his job and then got paid off in a manner he didn't expect."

"Old history," said Ross. He wasn't annoyed at Radford's remarks, the thing was too important for that and, anyway, all three of them were old friends. "But what happens next?"

"We find Ludec," said Carson. Radford raised his eyebrows.

"Rescued?"

"He is to be found and rescued if possible."

"And if not possible?"

It sometimes seemed to Ludec as if this was one of the most pleasant times of his life. Each day he was attended by Colonel Ewart and each day they had long conversations. They took trips too, taking a flitcopter and soaring over the rolling woods and plains of Kindy. It would have been easy to dismiss the other flitcopters which never left them; easy also to overlook the fact that they never landed in populated areas.

Had Ludec been a younger man, or other than what he was, the treatment might have worked. Ewart was sympathetic, his courtesy was smooth, the attention paid to the old man was flattering. He was made to feel important, intelligent and appreciated by those around him. It was flattery but so subtle and so engaging that it was hard to admit that it was flattery at all.

But Ludec never for one moment forgot that he was a prisoner.

He was old, experienced in the ways of men and, above all, he was a master of extrapotential logic. It amused him to wait knowing that the holiday had to have an end. He could afford to wait. He was not surprised when the routine was broken.

Ewart, as usual, was at his desk. As usual he gestured Ludec to a chair, offered cigarettes, inquired about his health, his comfort, his wishes. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he passed a sheet of paper towards the old man.

"This is something which will interest you, professor. It is a simple problem in extrapotential logic. As you know Kindy exports bula pods
to Eden and receives various items in exchange. We have a trade rival who also cultivates bula and who has managed to acquire a stranglehold on our common market. What we would like you to tell us is how best we can use our forces to restore an equitable balance of trade."

"Forces?"

"Commercial forces, naturally." Ewart gestured towards the paper. "The data is assembled there for your consideration. Would you require the use of a computing mechanism?"

"No, thank you."

"You can do it without?" Ewart's voice was loaded with admiration. "You are a clever man, professor."

"Too clever to be misguided." Ludec didn't touch the paper. His eyes remained steady on the examiner. Ewart was the first to speak.

"Misguided? Surely you are mistaken? It is only a small thing I ask."

"Small?"

"A matter of a commercial adjustment, to you, can only be small. I wonder that you hesitate."

"I do not hesitate. I refuse."

"I see." Ewart, if he felt disappointment, did not show it. "Aren't you comfortable here?"

"Very comfortable. It would be ungrateful of me to state otherwise."

"Gratitude, professor, should work both ways. You would find us very grateful if you could see your way clear to solve this little problem for us. I assure you that it has no military significance whatsoever."

Ludec didn't reply. It had been cleverly done, he admitted it, but it had failed because he had expected it. He had, he realized, been subjected to a stream of constant propaganda since the moment he first met the examiner. All the conversations, all the trips and the holiday atmosphere had been deliberately designed to soften him, to make him amenable so that now, when he was asked an undoubtedly simple and harmless request, he would have agreed from sheer gratitude if nothing else.

Then, of course, there would have been other requests, and others, and each would have been a little less harmless until they owned what they had slaughtered a shipload of men to obtain.

He felt almost sorry to disappoint them.

He wondered just what would come next.

Leaver was asleep at Twist In, working on the principle that it was best to get things while they were going. He didn't regret missing the queer, inside-out twisting which always accompanied the transition from normal flight to hi-drive even though it was a tourist Must. Leaver was no tourist, he was no businessman either no matter what his papers might say though, in a sense, that wasn't strictly true. He was a businessman in a peculiar sort of trade in which murder, violence and sudden death played no small part.

Leaver was one of Radford's boys. Sprawled on his bunk he stretched
in the sheer pleasure of attainment. Being what he was supposed to be he traveled in style with his own cabin and first-class treatment. He grinned as the wall-speaker chimed and a beautifully modulated female voice announced:

"Dinner is now ready in the salon."

Leaver could appreciate the humor of it.

He didn't pause as he entered the salon but habit sent his eyes flickering about the compartment. Before he took his seat he had assessed the other passengers. Rich, worried, spoiled, indolent and a scatter of those who had money and saw no reason for not spending it. His table held a red-faced man who introduced himself as an agent for a drug company; a society girl who labored under the delusion that to be ignorant was to be cute, a matron riding herd on her husband and a young man who looked as if he might be a poet but who was probably the second son of some tycoon.

Leaver nodded at them, sat down, unfolded his napkin and slid easily into the groove he was supposed to occupy.

"Heading Outworld, Leaver?" Mason, the drug agent, spoke around his fork. Leaver nodded.

"Me, too." Mason gulped his mouthful. "Now don't tell me it's dangerous, I'm not interested. All I know is that with the Outworlder's getting the hogs share of the market this is no time to slack."

"Is it dangerous?" Leaver was innocent. The matron was horrified.

"Well! Surely you must have heard about the dreadful thing which happened at Bude? Piracy, in this day and age, you wouldn't think the patrol would allow it!"

"Did they?" Leaver sipped at his wine. "Allow it, I mean."

"It happened." To the matron that was enough. "If my daughter wasn't expecting a baby on Arle, nothing would have persuaded me to leave Earth. Her first, you know, a girl needs her mother at a time like that."

Leaver thought that the girl needed her mother about as much as a hole in the head but he didn't say so. He didn't pursue the conversation either and soon the matron was talking to Mason to the drug agent's obvious discomfort. Lighting a slender cigar he settled back, toying with his coffee and brandy, his eyes somnolent but his ears very much alert.

The society girl was talking to the poet and appealing to his male vanity by a thirst for knowledge. She seemed confident he could explain to her in words of one syllable just what hi-drive was and how it worked. He couldn't. No one could. When she appealed to Leaver he shrugged.

"Think of a moving strip," he suggested. "One man is walking on the sidewalk, another man is walking on a moving strip. They both walk at the same rate but because one is walking on a moving strip he is traveling faster than the other. Call the sidewalk normal space and call the moving strip hi-drive and you have it."

"But isn't there something about subjective time?" She was pretty, even
The place was very sterile, very clean, very bright and shining with its polished metal, gleaming crystal and ceramics. It looked like the operating theater of a modern hospital, which it probably was, but Professor Ludec wasn’t deluded. It was a torture chamber and he was to be the victim.

“Are you sure that you haven’t reconsidered, professor?” Ewart was still the same, his voice as carefully modulated as before, his clothing snug to his body and his eyes as they had always been. If anything, his politeness made things worse.

“No.” Ludec swallowed against the dryness of his throat. He gestured towards the room. “Is this necessary?”

“It could be avoided.” Ewart paused, waiting for an answer. When none came he signaled towards an elderly man wearing a white coat who looked like the doctor he was.

“This is Dr. Johns,” said Ewart. “He would like to examine you.”

“My heart is sound,” said Ludec. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. He looked and acted like a man in the extreme of nervous fear. He was sweating as Johns led him towards a chair, strapped him down and adjusted various electrodes. “You know,” he said to Ewart, “you are a foolish man.”

“Indeed?”

“You fail to recognize opportunity,” said Ludec. “You are young, ambitious and intelligent in a fashion and yet your methods are barbaric. I—”

“Enough!” Ewart glanced at Johns who nodded. “Let us begin.”

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Johns stepped back and threw a rheostat to the first notch.

Ludec fainted.

"Revive him," snapped Ewart. He waited until Ludec regained consciousness then nodded to Johns who again operated the switch.

Ludec fainted again.

He did it quite easily, not even straining against the straps as the current seared his nerves. It was almost as if he simply fell asleep at the first touch of pain. He did it twice more and then a third time. Johns glanced at Ewart and shrugged:

"Unusual but not unknown," he said. "I'm afraid that this method of persuasion isn't going to work."

"Why not?"

"Ludec is unusual in that he has a built-in defense mechanism against pain. He simply cannot stand pain so he faints to avoid it." Johns began to unfasten the straps. "We could raise his pain level, of course, but that wouldn't do any good. It is the actual sensation of pain which causes the faint-escape not the thought or sight of it. I'm sorry, examiner."

Ewart bit his lip, it was an unforeseen complication. Ludec, he knew, was an unusual man in many ways but he had never anticipated this. Even with the evidence before his eyes he found it hard to believe.

"Could a man have such an anti-survival trait?"

"He could, and has," said Johns. "Remember that pain is a variable. I don't suppose for one moment that if he were in a fire, for example, and was slightly burned, he would faint."
In such a case he would be in such an emotional state that he wouldn't feel the pain; his pain level would have risen beneath the threat of extinction." He finished unfastening the straps. "But that doesn't help us in this case. He was terrified when we fastened him in the chair. Pain and torment, to him, are simply unbearable."


"Strength is relative," he said. "Ludec's strength lies in other directions," he looked down at the unconscious man. "Such an imagination," he mused. "The ability to take data and extrapolate it on lines of logical sequence so that he can predict the outcome even before the act. We can all do that, of course, but when we do it we only make shrewd guesses. Ludec doesn't guess, he knows, and he knows with a hundred per cent accuracy."

"If you are correct, then he knew exactly what we intended to do."

"Of course." Johns looked surprised. "Surely you assessed that in your calculations?"

"Naturally, but if he is so afraid of pain and yet knew that he would be subject to pain, then why accept the ordeal?" Ewart answered his own question. "Unless he knew that it would be a mere formality. He must know of his peculiarity." His face hardened. "I wonder if he would be as willing to accept amputation?"

"Raise his pain level and administer local anesthetics?" Johns pondered the problem as if it were only of academic interest. "The mental shock of seeing his limbs being severed from his body would undoubtedly throw him into catatonia—another form of escape mechanism. I cannot advise it, examiner."

"No, you are probably correct. In any case it would hardly be the way to gain his active co-operation." He looked sharply at the doctor. "Is something wrong?"

"I was just thinking about what he said to you," said Johns. "It struck me as rather odd. Why should he accuse you of being a man who failed to recognize opportunity?"

"I have no idea." Ewart was stiff. "It is of no importance." He glanced down at Ludec. "Revive him and proceed to the next stage. You know what to do."

Johns nodded, his eyes thoughtful as they watched Ewart leave the room. He was frowning as he stooped over the unconscious man.

Carson was playing politics. He was urbane, bland, punctiliously polite and supremely affable and his voice was like rich cream as he played with words. Inwardly he fretted at the necessity of what he was doing. It would be a relief to be able, just for once, to speak his mind, to cut through the painful protocol and the whole phony facade. Not that he would, of course, or even could for that matter. He had played politics all his life and had found the weapon of words to be potent indeed.

So he smiled and relaxed in out-
ward ease and offered hospitality to
the Ambassador of the Outworld Fed-
eration, a man Carson heartily de-
tested.

"Some more wine, Your Excell-
ency? A little wine does help to re-

tax a man, I always say."

Serg Helbroft grunted but accept-
ed more wine. Like all Outworlders
he seemed to be carrying a perpetual
chip on his shoulder and his position
so inflated his esteem that he was in-
sufferable. Now he sipped the wine,
grunted again, and set down the glass.

"I'll not waste time, Carson," he
snapped. "The fact is that the pres-
ence of armed ships of the Terran
League in Outworld territorial space
can no longer be tolerated. They must
be withdrawn immediately!"

"But, Your Excellency, surely we
discussed this matter before and you
agreed, I am certain, that while the
threat of piracy still existed our ships
were justified in protecting spatial
commerce." Carson helped them both
to more wine. "The need, as I see it,
still exists."

"How so?"

"As yet the pirates have not been
cought." Carson raised his glass and
studied the color of his wine. "I sug-
gest that, until they have been de-
stroyed, our ships will continue to pa-
trol as at present."

"The Outworld Federation does not
see it in quite that light."

"The Outworld Federation has suf-
fiered no loss because of these pi-
rates!" Carson lowered his glass and
stared directly at his companion.
"Your demands could give rise to ugly
speculations," he said deliberately.
"The peoples of the League may even
think that the Federaton has some-
thing to hide. A ridiculous concept,
I admit, but a natural one in the cir-
cumstances."

"Very ridiculous!" Helbroft snorted
his contempt and then, because he was
also a diplomat, his voice became cas-
ual. "Do you believe that the pirates
originated in the Federation?"

"It is possible." Carson's smile and
shrug took any offense from the
words. "After all, the Outworld plan-
ets are, in many cases, not as fully
developed as those of the League. It
is feasibly possible that a group of
hot-heads may have turned pirate. It
was undoubtedly an individual enter-
prise and, as such, indefensible."

"Of course."

"It is inconceivable that it could be
anything else," continued Carson. "Pi-
racy with its attendant murder, pillage
and destruction, is not the act of a re-
 sponsible government. A group, on
the other hand, could have considered
that they had much to gain." He
sipped at his wine. "I refer, of course,
to Professor Ludec."

"The master logician?"

"Yes. Unfortunately he is dead,
wantonly murdered, a tragic loss to
the Terran League and to civilization
as a whole. But, if by some miracle he
were not dead, but in the hands of the
pirates—I am talking sheer surprize,
you understand—then things would
be very different."

"How so?"

"Isn't it obvious? You know of the
professor and his unique talent. Imag-
ine that he is the prisoner of a small group of men and that, by some method, they persuade him to help them. Such a group would then know exactly where and how to strike for maximum effect. They could literally do as they pleased."

"Pirates?" Helbroft sneered. "I can hardly think so."

"If they were pirates," said Carson softly. He seemed very interested in his wine. "I find it interesting to speculate, as you must also, and in a way it is a necessary part of our daily life. Assume that Ludec did not die. Assume that he is the prisoner of a small group of, say, military officers. Assume that they are intelligent enough to recognize their opportunity. How long do you think it would take them to form a cabal, force a coup d'etat and, literally, become masters of—Well, you see what I mean."

"But Ludec is dead."

"Yes. So, if they were normal pirates, his death means nothing to them. They were simply after loot. Being what they are they will strike again—if they are genuine pirates."

"Is there any doubt?" Helbroft bridled. "Are you suggesting—"

"I suggest only that, until they are destroyed, our ships will continue to patrol as at present," said Carson blandly. "I am sure you understand."

Later, alone, he drank neat Scotch but it did little to remove the taste from his mouth.

people professed to adore but which Leaver could have done without. He pushed aside his plate wondering at the mismanagement which had terminated their flight through hidrive halfway through a meal. At a table next to his own a woman screamed with a falsetto falseness.

"Goodness! Do you think we will be attacked by the pirates?"

Her companion, a man old enough to be her father but wasn't, soothed her but she had only echoed the general sentiment. Personally Leaver was sick of it. He seemed to have heard nothing but pirates, what they had done, what they could do and what they might do ever since he had left Earth. At Arle, at Cord, at Benwick and at Leam it had been the same. Now that they were actually within Outworld Federation territorial space it seemed worse.

As was the shipboard inspection.

The inspectors were, he guessed, from Hind, and they took what amounted to a sadistic delight in exerting their authority. It wasn't enough that they examined each person's papers with painstaking care. They insisted on fully proving identities, disclosures of business, reasons for travel and added insult to injury by demanding the answers to certain highly personal questions.

Waiting his turn Leaver wondered why they thought it necessary to so display their power. If he knew the answer to that, he guessed, he would know the answer as to why the Federation should be so anti-League in the first place. It probably all

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stemmed from a thwarted jealousy or an inferiority complex with attendant overcompensation; something like that. The small boy determined to show his parents that he was better than the old man or the tough orphan flexing his muscles for fear that gentleness should be mistaken for weakness.

He found it rather ridiculous.

The man ahead of him didn’t find it either ridiculous or amusing. He faced the inspector, his ears burning and face mottled with anger.

"What the devil do you mean? I’ve traded with Hind for years now, what’s the point of all this?"

"You will answer the questions," said the inspector coldly.

"I refuse! You have no right to question me on such matters."

"No?" The inspector was enjoying this. "It may have escaped your attention but we on Hind are not degenerate Earth scum like some who bathe on us. We have tolerated your kind for far too long. We have allowed you to exploit us and suffered your moral turpitude with amazing generosity. That is at an end. The inspector picked up a rubber stamp and slammed it down on the passport before him. "Entry refused. Next!"

"But—" The man’s face turned from red to a sickly white. He looked at his passport as if he simply couldn’t believe what he saw. "But you can’t do this! My business! I—"

"Next!" The inspector ignored him. Leaver stepped forward, pushing against the reject.

"You heard what the inspector said," he snapped. "Be on your way." He laid his papers on the desk, waited as the official scanned them, and then answered the inevitable questions.

His business, he explained, was that of traveling agent. His firm were worried about the apparent breaking down of friendly relations between the League and the Federation and he was making a trip to ease the situation where and how he could. It might well be, depending on his report, that the entire firm would switch from Earth to one of the Outworld planets. The regulations on trade back in the League were hamstringing expansion and the growing habit of minor officials demanding bribes was something no reputable firm could tolerate.

There was more, much more, all pitched in the same vein. Leaver didn’t make the mistake of actually decrying the League, but he certainly didn’t go out of his way to offend the Federation either. It was common psychology, the con man’s stock-in-trade. The inspector reached for his rubber stamp.

"You are visiting Hind, of course?"

"Naturally."

"And after?"

Leaver hesitated, then gave a grin. "Well now, that depends. I’d like to cover as much territory as possible and I’d rather not be tied to a strict routine. It may be that I’ll be finished here sooner than I think or, again, it may take longer than I estimate. Frankly, my movements depend on the next available ship."
"I see." The inspector pondered a moment then made up his mind. "I'll give you both entry and an open visa." The thud of the stamps echoed his words. "If you hurry, you will catch the first ferry."

The ferry, like all ferries, followed a strict operational procedure. Falling from the interstellar vessel it orbited the planet below, swinging closer and closer as it drove down through the atmosphere. Sitting slumped in his seat Leaver appeared to be half asleep, his eyes vacant and his body listless, the typical picture of a man who had no great love of space travel and ferry transport in particular.

But Leaver wasn't half-asleep and he certainly wasn't listless. He was concentrating as the ferry circled the world below, his whole attention focused on the need to distinguish a particular sound via the tiny receiver imbedded in his mastoid.

The sound which a certain minuscule radio capsule powered by muscular contraction and radiating on a VHF band would emit on direct line-of-sight.

Ludec's own, individual recognition signal.

The cell was a bare box ten feet on a side. It held a single light-glow plate, toilet facilities and a bare mattress. Water came through one faucet, semiliquid food through another. There was no window and no apparent door. The walls, floor and ceiling were perforated with millions of tiny holes which effectively killed all sound-reflection so that shouting became an uncomfortable thing to do.

Ludec did not shout. He sat cross-legged on the mattress, his eyes distant with thought. He was nude and something had been injected into him which had caused the complete loss of all his hair. The same substance had, apparently, stunned the follicles so that he remained totally hairless.

He was waiting.

He had no means of marking the passage of time and had no idea how long it had been since his capture. He could guess, but he could not be certain. It was something he refused to let worry him.

There was a sigh behind him, a whisper of motion and a slight difference in the temperature of his naked back. He turned. Ewart stood against the wall. He did not speak and for a long while the two men stared at each other. Then the examiner sighed and stepped forward.

"We meet again, professor."

Ludec did not reply.

"You are a fortunate man," continued Ewart. "Or perhaps an unfortunate man, it rather depends on the point of view. To suffer a little or to suffer a lot, which do you regard as the more favorable?"

"A stupid question," said Ludec. "Do you really expect an intelligent answer?"

"I had hoped that by now you would have evaluated your true position and reached the logical conclusion." Ewart leaned his shoulders
against the wall facing Ludec. "Is there something masochistic in your nature that you appreciate and even enjoy this experience?"

"Solitude has never bothered me." Ludec smiled. "If a man cannot tolerate his own company, then he is a poor man indeed. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"The answers to certain problems."

"I will help you if I am allowed."

"You will?" Ewart straightened his eyes, for the first time, showing emotion. "Now you are displaying true intelligence, professor. You will never regret this, I promise you."

"Wait!" Ludec held up his hand. "I think you have misunderstood what I said. I will not help the Federation against the League."

"But—"

"I will help you if I am allowed," repeated Ludec deliberately. "Or are you a man who needs no help at all?"

"What possible help could you give me? Personal help, that is?"

"That is for you to say," Ludec was bland. "You obviously consider me of great importance—why else capture me? It follows then that I must have something you desperately need. You, obviously, have been selected to obtain that something. I am not too conversant with your culture but I should imagine that it is not one which graciously accepts failure."

"I have not failed."

"No?" Ludec shrugged. "You should remember that it is dangerous to give a logician data on which to base an extrapolation. I do not envy you, my friend."

"And I," snapped Ewart, "do not envy you." He hesitated. "Why do you say I have failed?"

"I am important to the League and I am important to the Federation. If you had simply wanted to rob the League of my services, then you quite simply could have killed me but you did not do that. Therefore, you want my active assistance in your proposed war against the League. I shall not give it."

"You underestimate us, professor."

"No," said Ludec. He looked thoughtful. "No, I do not underestimate you."

It was, though Ewart couldn't know it, almost an admission of fear.

The image of the screen flickered a little despite the banks of relays and rectifiers which fought to keep the beamed signal in correct focus and density. The flicker made Ross seem older than he was or perhaps it was Carson's own imagination. Radford, at his side, puffed at a cigarette.

"They got the pirate," said Ross.

"Congratulations!"

"Where?"

"Near Kindy, I'm out there now. The locals don't like it, but there's nothing they can do at the moment. They certainly didn't waste any time."

"I didn't think they would," said Carson. "What happened?"

"A farce," Ross sounded disgusted. "The way it was told to me was the way it will be told to the news agencies. A Kindian ship Twisted Out near the second planet of their sys-
tem. The pirate, obviously mistaking
the vessel for a decadent unit of the
Terran League, attacked without
warning. The Kindian ship promptly
returned their fire and turned the
raider into incandescent ash. As the
threat of piracy has now been totally
removed by the efforts of the Out-
world Federation, there is now no
longer the slightest possible excuse
for armed ships of the Terran League
to continue to patrol Outworld ter-
ritorial space et cetera, et cetera. You
know the kind of thing."

"I invented it," said Carson. He
rubbed his chin. "Incandescent ash,
'eh? Just how did they manage to do
that?"

"A direct hit with an atomic
torpedo."

"And so no wreckage, no sur-
vivors, no awkward questions. In
short a nice, neat whitewash job—or
so they think."

"It's raw," admitted Ross, "but
what can we do? I've tried to make
investigations but if I go too far some
fool will step out of line and then
we'll have an incident on our hands."
His flickering image became wolfish.
"Not that I'd object to a showdown
right now. I've had enough of these
Outworlders. Give the word and I'll
move in."

"You know better than that, Ross.
No matter how tempting it might be
to smack baby, you can't do it. Not
while baby has such big teeth." He
sighed. "All you can do is to pick up
your marbles and come back home.
You know what to do, but waste no
time. It's better to leave the party
early than wait to be kicked out."

"Right," said Ross. "But I don't
have to like it."

The image flickered, died, pulsed
and faded. Radford sent a smoke ring
coiling against its surface.

"I often wonder," he mused, "what
it must have been like in the old
days. A gang of colonials began to
flex their muscles so you sent in a
couple of gunboats and made them
eat crow. Easy, simple, cut-and-
dried be-good-or-be-beaten politics.
You could hurt them and they
couldn't hurt you." He sighed. "Life
must have been easy then."

"If you had the strength," said
Carson. "Then people got all moralis-
tic and fell over backwards trying to
compromise. That was the height of
diplomacy; the art of setting a couple
of big ones against each other with
you as the supposed excuse for the
row between them."

Radford grunted. "Old history and
it doesn't help us now. Ross can't
crack the whip, because, if he does,
they will dump a few loads of radio-
actives on League planets. We'll dump
a few back, of course, but since when
has mutual suicide been a solution?
For the first time in the history of
man the weaker is the stronger—
they have less to lose."

Carson nodded. "It's a mess."

"It's a time when the individual
comes back into his own," said Rad-
ford. He lit a fresh cigarette. "Well,
we know one thing, the origin of the
pirates. You certainly managed to
smoke them out."

"Primitive emotion works with
primitive logic." Carson shrugged. "They found that their pretense had backfired into an embarrassment. To end it they 'found' and 'destroyed' the 'pirates'. The only ones who could do that, of course, were the originators of the 'pirates' themselves. So now we know where Ludec is likely to be. Will your boys catch on?"

Radford nodded. "Relax," he said. "Ludec is as good as rescued or dead."

Ludec was neither. Looking at the map Leaver frowned, reached for a cigarette, remembered and reluctantly gave up the idea of smoking. On Kindy only decadent Earthmen smoked and he had no wish to be recognized as such. Hawken, the agent, rested his finger on the map and pursed his lips.

"Are you sure?"

"The signal came from the area." Leaver was positive. Hawken didn't argue.

"There's only one building in that area," he said. "The Institute of Medical Research."

"Tell me about it."

"It's a small place where they experiment on the mental and physical effect of bula. A couple of doctors, a lot of animals, some helpers and a few guards. Seems an odd place to hide Ludec."

"Not odd at all." Leaver leaned back, his eyes thoughtful. "They're playing with fire, and they know it. In one of the cities there is always the chance of a leak; too many people would know too much. Out there they are isolated and safe." He shrugged. "So they think, anyway. Maybe they yokels are due for a surprise."

Hawken wasn't offended, he wasn't a yokel even though he looked the part. The firm which Leaver represented was a genuine firm with genuine agents and a genuine trade. It was odd in the fact that it never lost money and its higher employees lived at a fantastic level of income, no one seemed to notice. The firm employed the best, paid the highest and was a perfect cover for Terran espionage.

Bribery was a power the Terran League never underestimated and successfully used. Perhaps because it had the wealth to make that power really work.

"What will you need?" said Hawken. Since Leaver had introduced himself the agent had automatically taken his orders. His main job was to provide help, information and cover, the Special Agent would take care of the rest.

"Some sleep," said Leaver. "Some food. Detailed maps of the area and a breakdown on the military setup here, with key-personnel—you know the sort of thing."

Hawken looked surprised. Leaver grinned.

"Look," he said. "I've been busy looking for a needle in a haystack and I mean that quite literally. If they hadn't tipped their hand, I'd still be looking, and, if you think chasing all over space, ferrying down to every planet, listening nonstop and catching every ship on the move is fun, you should try it sometime. I'm tired.
and need to stock up on some decent cooking.”

“Listening?”

“To gossip,” said Leaver. He was more tired than he thought to have made such a slip. Special Agents equipment was secret and they wanted it to stay that way. He yawned. “Well, where’s the bed?”

He slept, woke and ate and then settled down to study. Kindy, as he expected, had a spartan culture in that everything was supposedly for the good of the state. It was a common culture to be found on Outworld planets. Life hadn’t been easy to start with and, though progress had been rapid, some of the old necessities still lingered. The existence of a strong military junta helped to keep the populace in line.

It was a dangerous setup. Any military culture must be dedicated to the concept of conquest and the Terran League offered a tempting target, Kindy was the main agitator, but the rest of the Federation pushed close behind. It was, thought Leaver, like a pot on the simmer and about ready to boil. The trouble was that a lot of innocent people were going to get burned if that happened.

It was his job to see that it didn’t happen.

At first the darkness had troubled Ludec. The total absence of all light accentuated the silence so that he seemed to actually hear the pounding of his heart. Irrationally he had feared for his sight and had lain, eyes
strained, hoping to catch some glimpse which would reassure him. He saw nothing but flashing retinal images and, after a while, logic and sanity came to his rescue. He accepted the darkness for what it was.

They had tried persuasion. They had tried pain and then intimidation. Now they were trying darkness.

It was effective, he had to admit that, or would have been with another man. He smiled to himself at the conceit of the thought then lost the smile in deeper consideration. He was an oxygen-breather, a man, and basically, all men are the same. How could he be certain that he would remain immune?

The technique wasn't new, but it had been applied with a subtlety which made it all the more effective. They had removed all his hair and stunned the follicles in some way so that he remained completely bald. Hair has long been a man's pride—remove it and you take away that pride, the very stamp of masculinity.

Take away all clothing. A nude man is a helpless thing conditioned as he is by civilization. From the very day of birth covering of one sort or another is a part of normal life. Nudity spells defenselessness.

Put him in a small room, totally soundproofed and equipped with the bare essentials of life.

Leave him.

That was the subtest torment of all. Man is a gregarious animal, he craves the company of his own kind. He likes to talk, to feel a part of a whole, to know that others are always around. A man, naked, isolated in a small, dark, soundproof room is a man cut off from the world, from life itself. For an intelligent man it was worse for then he is reduced to the level of an animal and has to intelligence to realize it.

Ludec sighed, knowing that there would be other things, that the torment would not remain static. The oxygen content of the air would be lowered. The food, already a tasteless pulp, would be reduced. The water would become scarce. Dirt would accumulate. The temperature would fall—

He shuddered, his own logic completing the pattern. He would be ground down, down, down and then so gently, so insidiously, would come the conditioning. Whisper-speakers would talk directly to his subconscious while he rested in exhausted slumber. His brain, dull and receptive, would eagerly accept the insidious suggestions, the warped logic. Without drugs, without physical pain, without any specious arguments he would come to accept what was offered. He would accept it and believe it without dispute.

And there was no escape. It was in fact as escape-proof as a perfect logical syllogism.

There was nothing but time, for such conditioning took time. No hope but Earth for only Earth could save him. And, if they did not save him, then he would help destroy them. There was nothing else he could do.

He could not destroy himself.
The general was tall, slim, hard of face and eye. Superficially he looked a little as Ewart might have looked were he older and dressed in black and silver heavy with braid. He stared at the examiner then at Dr. Johns standing deferentially to the rear.

"How much longer must I wait until this man agrees to co-operate?"

"These things take time," said Ewart. "There have been unforeseen complications."

"His inability to endure pain?"

The general nodded. "I have read the reports. Why couldn't he be conditioned in some other way?"

"He is." Ewart nodded to Johns who snapped a switch. An infrared receiving screen glowed to a ghostly life. Ludec, sitting huddled in a corner of his cell, came into view.

"So?" The general was impatient. Johns hastened to explain.

"We are working under peculiar difficulties. We require more than agreement, we require active co-operation. To obtain it we must first persuade Ludec that our cause is both just and logical."

"Can there be any doubt as to that?"

"Apparently there is. To Ludec, that is," explained Johns hastily, "he refuses to admit either the justice or the logic of our struggle against the League."

"He must be made to change his attitude."

"That is the entire purpose of this conditioning. We are breaking him down to almost the animalistic level."

At that point he will be susceptible to suggestion. Unfortunately it takes time."

The general nodded, his eyes on the screen. Ludec hadn't changed position and the general stared at him as he would look at a piece of wood.

"It is difficult to believe," he said, "that such an insignificant looking creature could have such importance." He glanced at Ewart and then at Johns. "It is also difficult to believe that you should have nothing to report but failure. It is not what I had expected."

"Failure?" Ewart stared at his superior. "Am I to take it that you consider I have failed?"

"That is the usual converse to success," said the general coldly. "And you can hardly claim to have succeeded." He glanced at the screen again then irritably snapped his fingers. Johns hastened to switch it off. "I think he should be removed to a different place."

"No!"

"Indeed?" The general stared coldly at the examiner. Ewart swallowed.

"To remove him now, to even have contact with him, would be to undo all that we have done. The effects of this treatment are accumulative. With all due respect, general, I must advise that he stay here until the conditioning is complete."

"Your advice is noted—and rejected."

"I am sorry." Ewart remained calm. "If you insist on ignoring my advice, then I have no alternative but
to refer the matter to the High Council."

"You would dare!" The general stared at Ewart waiting for the examiner's eyes to fall. They did not fall. Slowly the general nodded.

"I see we understand each other, examiner. You will hear more on this matter."

When he had gone Johns looked thoughtfully at the other man.

I wonder just how long it will be before you are arrested, replaced and tried for treason."

"Are you joking?"

"No, just being logical." Johns switched on the screen. "I haven't said much before, but I've been thinking a lot. I've been wondering just how you condition a man who is probably fully aware of just what you are trying to do."

"Ludec?" Ewart joined Johns before the screen. "If I remember, you said something of a similar nature before."

"It still applies. Ludec is a genius, there is no other word to describe him. I refuse to believe that he didn't anticipate everything that has happened to him since the moment of his capture."

"I doubt it. If so, he would have recognized his position and agreed to help us. Logically he can do nothing else."

"Exactly—and that is why I am worried. Ludec is a man who has always lived by his logic, why then should he change now? I don't think that he has changed." Johns stared thoughtfully at the screen. "It was rather odd that he promised to help you, don't you think?"

"His offer was a trap. He obviously hoped to weaken my allegiance to the Federation."

"You think so? I didn't take it like that. It was, after all, a personal offer of assistance should you allow it. Strange that, at this moment, you could use such assistance."

"I—" Ewart broke off, considering. The conversation, naturally, had been recorded and Johns had heard the recording. The tape had been sent to Headquarters and others had obviously heard it, too. He had just made an enemy of the general and it took only elementary logic to deduce that the two added together would spell trouble.

On Kindy military trouble was usually solved by a firing squad.

Through the infrared scanner the building looked ghostly and deserted. Leaver took the instrument from his eyes, blinked in the total darkness and adjusted the scanner again. A voice, tiny and remote, whispered in his ear.

"How much longer?"

Changa was impatient and a little resentful that Leaver had arrived first. He and Hoolin, two more of Radford's boys, had arrived on Kindy two days after Leaver and felt bad about it. Most of their disappointment had vanished in the past week of intense activity.
"Take it easy." Leaver settled himself more easily on the ground. It was dark, a cold wind was blowing and he wasn't really dressed for nocturnal activity. A second voice, that of Hoolin, echoed in his brain.

"I've contacted Ross. He will be arriving on schedule. Need any help?"

"No. How are things in the city?" "Bad." Hoolin chuckled. "With six of the top-brass dead from various causes everyone has the jumps. Are you sure you can handle it without me?"

"I'm sure. Sign off now, you're disturbing my concentration."

Leaver was getting worried. His plan had been simple and, like all simple plans, should work. With information supplied by the agent he had selected six leaders of the military junta as his victims. They all occupied key positions and, if they hadn't been actively engaged in the kidnapping of Ludec, then they should have been aware of it. Those six men had been assassinated.

It wasn't simply punishment though they deserved it for breaking the peace. It wasn't even to set an example, though, if it did, it would be all to the good. It was basically to create a situation of uncertainty and terror. When men die others get worried that they may also die. When the dead men leave a power-vacuum then there is always strife to fill it. Sooner or later someone in the know would remember that they had the answers to all their questions locked away in the isolated building. It was only a matter of waiting until they arrived.

Leaver had been waiting two nights and a day now.

A cold wind whipped under his collar and he shivered. His eyes burned and, despite the drugs he had taken fatigue began to master him. His lids drooped and he sighed. He snapped immediately fully awake as a voice whispered in his ear.

"Leaver!"

It was Changa. Even over the built-in radio his voice sounded excited. Leaver flexed the muscles of his throat in silent conversation.

"Where?"

"To your right. A drifting chopper without lights. Got it?"

"Got it."

Leaver swung up the scanner and stared at the lightless, almost soundless craft as it came drifting down. It bumped down between him and the building, landing by radar. The cabin door opened and a man descended. He was a tall man, slim like all Kindians, covered from neck to heel in a long, black, military cloak. Two other men stepped down beside him, aides, Leaver guessed. The pilot, obviously, remained within the craft.

"Leaver?"

"I'm on my way." Leaver rose to his feet. He, like the tall man, wore a long military cloak and, beneath it, he was dressed as a high ranking officer of the Kindian junta. Clamping the scanner to his eyes he began to run towards the building.

Changa sighed and settled his cheek against the stock of his auto-
matic rifle. It was a beautiful weapon, fitted with a universal compensating sight and loaded with silent, flashless ammunition. He waited until the distant figure of Leaver had reached the agreed position and then gently squeezed the trigger.

The men who had landed with the tall officer didn't know what had hit them. The pilot, relaxing in his chair, died as lead sliced through the thin skin of the flitcopter. The tall officer, striding arrogantly towards the building, didn't even guess anything was wrong until Leaver pressed a pistol against his kidneys.

"Relax," he said. "Just act normally and everything will be all right." Over the miniature radio which was man-made telepathy he spoke to Changa.

"I'm going in now. Wish me luck."

"You have the luck," said the unseen agent. Leaver grinned, then prodded his captive forward.

The captive was General Whylan, and, though he was a brave man, suicide didn't fit within his concept of bravery. He thumbed the signal button in the entry-code pattern, waited until the thick doors slid open and stepped inside. Leaver, pistol at the ready, followed him. Behind them the door hissed shut.

"General!" Johns stepped forward, then halted as he saw the other man. "I understood you were to arrive alone."

"He is alone," Leaver thrust the general forward so that he could cover the two of them with his gun. "Take me to Ludec."

"Ludec?" Johns looked surprised. "What are you talking about? Who are you?"

For answer Leaver swung back his cloak. Johns paled as he recognized the uniform beneath.

"You are both under arrest," snapped Leaver coldly. "The charge is treason against the Federation. I warn you that I shall shoot without hesitation if you attempt to resist. Now, take me to Ludec."

"No!"

Whylan clawed at his waist in a desperate effort to draw his pistol. Leaver turned his wrist, fired and the general slumped to the floor.

"He is dead," he told the doctor coldly. "Do you also wish to die?"

"Please!" Johns cringed at the threat of the weapon. "I'm not a traitor. Whylan contacted me and, as my superior officer, I had to obey his orders. He demanded that I release Ludec in his custody. I had no choice but to obey."

"Are you in command here?"

"No. Examiner Ewart is in command but he can't be trusted. He intends to use Ludec for his own ends. They have come to an agreement. That is why I—" He broke off, one hand lifting to his mouth.

"Yes?" said Leaver quietly. "You were saying?"

"Nothing."

"Perhaps I could help you." Leaver

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stared hard at the doctor. "Perhaps Whylan did contact you, but if he did, you were only too willing to help. Due to the assassination of several high officers things are in a state of flux and an ambitious man, guided by Ludec, could reach great heights. Is that why he came here alone?"

"Yes, but—"

"But, of course, knowing that Ewart had made plans of his own you were thinking only of the good of the Federation. Is that it?"

Johns nodded, he was sweating.

"You are, naturally, not to blame for Whylan's defalcation," said Leaver smoothly. "However, you can see how important it is that Ludec be immediately removed to a place of greater safety. I need hardly remind you that only the fullest co-operation at this stage will enable me to speak on your behalf at a later date." He seemed to have forgotten the pistol in his hand. "Now take me to Ludec."

"That," said Ewart, "will not be necessary."

The examiner stood just within the door, his hands open and held before him. He was unarmed—it was the only thing which saved his life. Leaver stepped back to give himself a wider field of fire, cursing himself for his own incompetence. He should have used greater care. He had concentrated too much on one man; using words when he should have used action.

It was small consolation to know that, even now, he held the whip hand.

"The door registers in my office," said the examiner. "I should explain that I am in command here. The entire building is, naturally, wired for sight and sound." He glanced at the doctor. "Johns should have remembered that."

"I had to play for time," stammered the doctor. "He shot down Whylan as if he had been an animal. There was nothing else I could do."

"Nor I—until Whylan arrived." Ewart stepped forward towards the body. He looked at Leaver. "I take it that you are an agent of the Terran League?"

"Are you insane?"

"You are reluctant to admit it, naturally." Ewart shrugged. "But there comes a time when pretense is a positive danger. I take it that you have come for Professor Ludec?"

"Yes."

"A remarkable man, the professor. A genius, there is no other word to describe him. We have had long conversations, he and I. I shall miss him."

Leaver shook his head. He had the feeling that things were getting beyond his control. Ewart glanced down at Whylan's body.

"I am going to stoop and pick up that pistol," he said. "I tell you this because I do not want you to shoot me. I intend you no harm—on the contrary, but it is a thing I must do. I might also add that I am the only man who is able to operate the lock on Ludec's cell. I suggest you bear that in mind."

Before Leaver could answer Ewart
had stooped, picked up the pistol—and shot Johns. The clatter of the falling weapon merged with the sound of the doctor’s fall. Calmly the examiner looked at the other man. Leaver eased his finger.

“Shall we go?”

Ludec looked, thought Leaver, something like a fish. Or, rather, like a hairless monkey. Then anger rose as he looked at the small, somehow pathetic figure huddled in the cell.

“Professor!”

Ludec looked up, blinking his eyes in the dim lighting. He swallowed and climbed to his feet. Leaver, stripping the cloak from his shoulders, wrapped it around the old man.

“Thank you.”

“How are you, professor? Are you fit enough to travel?”

“I shall be all right.” Ludec closed his eyes and swayed a little. “Are you from the League?”

“Yes.”

Ludec nodded and then, suddenly, tears began to course down his cheeks. He gulped.

“I am sorry...this weakness...it—”

“Forget it!” Anger rose within the Special Agent. “That Ewart, the boss of this place, do you want me to kill him?”

“No!” Ludec shook his head. “No, you mustn’t do that.” He glanced to where the examiner stood against the wall, his face impassive. Leaver grunted.

“He deserves it. I’ve just seen him shoot down a man in cold blood he—”

He broke off. Within his ear a tiny voice was yelling with undisguised urgency.

“Leaver! Get a move on! Three military type flitcopters loaded with men!”

“Coming!” Leaver spoke aloud. “We’ve got to get moving, professor. It’s no time to be queasy.” He raised his gun.

“No!” Ludec grabbed his arm. “Lock him in this cell. Hurry, I’ll explain later.”

Leaver hesitated, then slammed the door on the unresisting examiner. Together he and the old man ran through the building which, apparently, was deserted. At the main door he fumbled with the operating mechanism, Changa’s voice in his ear.

“Run man or you’ve had it! Run!”

“How bad?” Leaver tensed as the door mechanism began to hiss.

“About thirty men advancing on the building. Where are you?”

“At the door.”

“Head left as you come out. Hug the wall as you run. Got Ludec?”

“Yes.”

“Make it fast, Leaver.” Changa was urgent. “Now?”

“Now!”

The door opened. Leaver stooped, swung Ludec up in his arms and, ducking low, raced from the building. He kept the wall to his left and concentrated on nothing but speed. To his right, where the troops were advancing, he heard a shout which abruptly dissolved into a gurgle. Changa verified his suspicions.
"I'm covering you. Too many for a wipe-out but I'll do my best."

"Watch yourself!"

Bushes whipped around his legs and something cut the grass inches from his feet. Ludec seemed to weigh a ton and the ground had turned into glue. But no more shots came his way, the troops were too busy fighting the invisible death aimed by an invisible marksman.

Leaver blundered among trees, staggered, oriented himself and plunged on. Something dark loomed before him.

"Made it!" He set Ludec on his feet and fought for breath as he spoke to Changa. "Pull out and join us."

"No soap." A wracking explosion ripped the night with fire and fury. "They've got me bracketed, probably with peep-screens and dark lights. Well, it was fun while it lasted."

"Pull out man, you're not dead yet."

"Get on your way," snapped Changa. "Give my regards to Radford. I—"

His voice broke, snapped, died in Leaver's ear. He felt an emotional shock as if almost a part of him had died. Communication by subradio was more than just words. There was more than that, the very vibration of life itself and, when it died, it was more than silence.

Deep in the undergrowth a red fury sprang into being. A current had ceased to flow in a once-living brain. An organic trigger had closed and tiny capsules of energy had vented their fury. Changa had provided his own cremation. There would be no evidence for anyone to find.

Tired Leaver helped Ludec into the flitcopter.

The journey had its moments. There was a time when they had to land and hide while rotors droned above but they were normal hazards which Leaver took in his stride. As dawn broke Ludec wakened from his sleep and they had a chance to talk.

"Where are we going?"

"To a spot where Ross will send down a pick-up ferry to lift us to safety." Leaver stretched and fought his tiredness. Aside from the death of Changa it had been a successful operation, but he wished that he had killed Ewart. He said so. Ludec shook his head.

"No, he had to live, I wanted him to."

"Uh?"

"You see, he came to me. He was, not afraid, for fear is a term hard to apply to a man like Ewart, but perturbed. He had made an enemy, and he knew the consequences of failure. I had offered to help him and he wanted to take advantage of my offer. It was a simple thing to introduce the concept of supreme leadership to a man of his nature."

"He's a murdering swine!"

"He killed Johns, but that was essential. Officially Whyylan shot Johns and you, the mysterious attacker, shot Whyylan. Ewart was imprisoned and will be able to tell his story. Naturally..."
he de-activated all the recording devices before you arrived. With the information I was able to give him, he will very soon be Dictator of Kindy. Being now able to appreciate the power of the Terran League he will be less bellicose than the former military junta with their dreams of conquest.” Ludec nodded. “On the whole a very successful operation.”

“You—” Leaver clipped the controls on automatic and stared at the little man. “Do you mean to say that you engineered all that happened?”

“Of course not, how could I? I merely used what little ability I possess to predict certain events on the lines of extrapotential logic.” Ludec chuckled. “Certain things were surely obvious from the beginning. The facade of piracy, for example, would never have deluded the League. My capture and the reasons for it were obvious. Without being boastful I knew that the League would never permit the risk of my assisting the Federation to continue.”

“You know,” said Leaver thoughtfully, “I've the idea that you didn’t need outside help at all.”

“You are wrong.” Ludec was emphatic. “I did nothing, you understand, I was merely a catalyst. The show of force by Ross, the diplomatic threats of Carson, your own assassinations, all brought things to a head. They were, to me at least, obvious steps in a pattern which had to be followed once I had been captured.”

“I see.” Leaver felt a little deflated. “The Outworlders never knew what trouble they were buying when they grabbed you. Talk about the worm in the woodwork!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know, burrowing from within, that’s what you did. Just like a worm in the woodwork. You’d make a good Special Agent.”

“Thank you.” Ludec was always polite.

“Well,” said Leaver. “We did rescue you.”

“What’s the date?” asked Ludec. He smiled at Leaver’s expression. “I was completely isolated,” he explained, “and lost track of time. Still, I did have a wonderful chance to work out the logical schedule of events. Would you mind telling me the date?”

Leaver told him. Ludec sighed.

“I must be slipping,” he said. “You’re two days late.”

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