THE small group of Earth colonists stood on a hill, tense and expectant, as their leader advanced. He walked slowly away from the huddled mob holding up his gun. You could hear the mother weep.

I stood at ease to one side, as was proper. I knew what would happen, because I was from Transstar. We have been taught to understand the inevitable.

The child came running out of the woods. I noted that they were
A Transstar agent's duty was to observe,
not to save lives. But sometimes his duty
was — not to know where his duty stopped!

not the woods of Earth, though they were brown. Nor was the grass the grass of Earth, though it was green.
The child cried, "Mother!" The leader raised his gun and shot it.
Even though I understood that the child was no longer a "him" and had become an "it" since falling into the hands of the aliens, I felt a tremor underneath my conditioning. In Transstar you are taught that the conditioning is a sheath, pliable but breakable; you do not put all faith in it.
Now the important thing was the reaction of the small group of Earth colonists.

They had seen the heartbreaking inevitable. They knew with the logic of their minds that the boy had to die. On this planet there were two races, two kinds of life: the eaber and the Earthmen. The eaber would lure a child away if they could and see to its infection, returning it to the Earth colony.

It was a good trick the first time or two, and for the love of its children three thousand lives had been lost, two starting colonies wiped out. This third colony had to succeed. I suspected that was why Transstar sent me here.

The leader turned sadly towards his colonists. A man advanced: “A burial! It is safe to bury!”

“It is not safe to bury,” said the leader.

The man raised his arm. The leader hesitated and lost both his leadership and his life, because the half-maddened parent shot him in the chest …

RACKRILL came to my Transstar ship. “You stood there,” he said, eyes accusing. “You sit here now. You let the eaber do these things to us — yet you’re from Transstar, representing the incredible power of the Sol system. Why?”

“Transstar was formed to handle star-sized situations,” I replied. “So far this colony is meeting only the problems of a local situation.”

“Local situation!” He laughed bitterly. “I’m the third mayor in three weeks.”

“There’ll be no more children lost to the eaber,” I said.

“That’s for certain-sure,” he said, “but Transstar might lose one of its representatives if it doesn’t help us in our fight against the eaber. Our colony is sickened to watch you with your magnificent star-ship and your empire of power, standing by while we suffer.”

“I am sorry.”

He raised his hands and stepped towards me, but an orange light hummed from the walls. He looked surprised. He dropped his hands.

“Now that you’ve properly cursed me, tell me the real reason for your visit, Mr. Mayor,” I said, flicking the protective button off.

He eased into his chair wearily. It was a great planet to take the starch out of the leaders.

“We had a visit from the eaber.” He went on talking eagerly. The eaber had picked this planet, Point Everready, as an advance planet-city for their own culture. They would kill the Earth colony if it didn’t leave. Rackril had told them about Transstar, about me. That I represented the total war capacity of the solar system. That I was in instantaneous touch with Transstar Prime, near Mars, and that behind me stood a million space
ships and countless prime fighting men, with weapons of power and vigor that could pulverize the eaber to dust. That I was there to see that the Earth colony survived.

"This is only partly true," I said. "I am here to see whether an Earth colony can survive."

Anyway, Rackril had gotten the eaber stirred up. They were coming to see me. Okay?

"I am Transstar," I said. "I can only observe, not interfere."

He got mad again, but there was really no more to say. He left, going from the marvelous machinery of my ship back to the crudeness of the village. I felt sorry for him and his people and wished I could reassure him.

I could not.

Yet somewhere back at Transstar Prime there was more than ordinary interest in Point Everready. I wondered, as every Transstar agent must, how far Transstar would go on this project. Few Transstar men have ordered Condition Prime Total Red. Condition Prime Total Red is the complete amassing and release of our total war-making capacity directed at one enemy in one place at one time. You don't get a CPTR more than once in decades; men in Transstar have served a lifetime and never directed one.

This is good, because CPTR is devastating in cost, machines and men. It is the most jealously guarded prerogative of the Transstar system, which is in itself merely a check-and-report to keep track of all Earth colonies spread out among the stars.

I looked at my condition panel. It glowed an off-white on the neat star-ship wall. Condition white, nothing unusual; the same color I had stared at for five years as a full agent and fifteen years before that as both associate and assistant, learning the Transstar operation.

I thought about the dead boy, sleeping now on the grasses of Everready, as I made my daily report, pricking a card with three simple marks, feeding it to the transmitter which reported back to Prime. It seemed unfair, even with all my years of Transstar conditioning, that a boy would only deserve three pinpricks in a daily report. The human race had not been standing behind him.

It probably would not stand behind this colony.

For that matter, though I had the safety of this rather expensive star-ship, the human race would probably not stand behind me, if the eaber turned out to be tough aliens. Many an agent has died in local or regional situations.

I drank a cup of tea, but the warm drink didn't help. Somehow these last years I had become more emotional. It was hard to be a
Transstar agent — for, by the time you learned how, you were too knowing in the ways of space to keep that prep school enthusiasm. I remembered the men who had lived and the men who had died as I drank my tea and felt sad.

Towards midnight the colonists sent scout ships up, as ordered by Rackril. They were met by an equal number of eaber scout ships.

The patrol fight was dull, with drones being chopped off by both sides. Nothing decisive. The eaber were good. I wondered if they also had a Transstar somewhere back at their home planet, a totality of force that might match Condition Prime Total Red, and result in a stand-off fight. This had never happened in history. Someday we might even find somebody better than CPTR.

At that instant expansion to the stars would stop, I knew.

Whatever I thought about the eaber at long distance, I'd have a chance to learn more. A couple of them were now approaching my ship.

They were sentient life. They were neither monsters nor particularly Earthlike. It was this balance of like-unlike that gave me the beginnings of a shudder under my conditioning.

The reddish one advanced into my cabin. “Euben,” he said. He made a motion of turning with his hands, tapered fingers spread. A surge of sickness tickled in me, rushed up to a nerve agony. I just had time to relax and let the raping power of his ray, or whatever it was, knock me out into a welcome darkness. A non-conditioned man would have screamed and writhed on the floor, fighting the overpowering darkness. I rushed with it, gave in to it.

PRESENTLY there was a gentle bird-twitter. I sat up; Euben’s power turned off. He laughed down at me.

“Some Earth-power, some potency,” he said, gesturing at my control panel. I had, indeed, pushed my orange safety button, which should have frozen him immobile as it had Rackril. It had no effect on him or his friend.

I tried to get up, but was as weak and shaking as an old man. So I sat there.

“You are the protector to the Earthians,” he said.

“No, Euben. I am merely here to observe.”

“You’ll observe them made extinct, Watcher,” he said. “This is the perimeter of eaber. We want this planet ourselves.”

“That remains to be seen,” I said, finally rising stiffly and plopping into my chair. I turned off the useless orange button.

Euben roamed his eyes around the ship. “Better than your colony has. You are special.”
“I am special,” I said.
“They say you represent great power,” he said.
“That is true.”
“We have waited a long time to see this power,” said Euben. “We have exterminated two of your colonies, and have not seen it.”
“If this is all of eaber, it isn’t very large,” I said. “This planet could hardly hold a hundred thousand.”
“I said we were perimeter. Behind us, thousands of planets. Trillions of eaber. There is nothing like us in the universe.”
“We’ve heard that before.”
This time he brought up two hands, to begin his twirling. I reacted with a hypnosis block, which shunted off all my natural functions for a micro-second (with the help of the plate I was standing on). The pain was much less. He merely brought me to my knees.
“Ah, you are not totally feeble,” he said. “Still I make you bow to me with the twisting of my bare hands in the air.”
“Yes. But Earthmen do not greet new races with tricks and talk like two small boys bragging about how tough their older brothers are,” I said. “I am not here to brag tough. I am here to observe.”
“If you don’t like what you observe?”
“Perhaps we will do something about it. Perhaps not.”
He threw back his head and laughed. “You will die, die, die,” he said. “Watch this.” He nudged the other eaber who stepped forward and brought something out of his robe.
It was a boned, dehydrated human.

The thing — evidently a human survivor of an earlier colony — had the floppy, mindless manner of a puppy dog, mewling and whimpering on its long chain. Euben snapped his fingers. The former human ki-yied and scampered back under its owner’s robe.

“Cute,” said Euben. “De-skeletoned Earthmen bring a good price in the pet-shops of eaber, so you are not a total loss in the universe.”

There came a sudden scream and convulsion from the eaber’s robe. The eaber jumped back. The tragic, deboned human fell to the floor dead, spending a thin, too-bright red ebb of blood.

“Eh — how did you do that?” asked Euben, stepping back a little.
“I am Transstar,” I said. “Certain things we do not permit with our life-form. I urge you not to continue this practice.”

“So—” said Euben toeing at the dead man. “And he was so cute, too. Ah, well. There are more out there.”

I controlled my voice and did not look down. “Can you establish your need for this planet?” I asked.
“Yes. We are eaber; that is enough anywhere in space.”

I stepped to a wall chart and
made a gesture. “This planet also falls along our perimeter. We occupy this space—so. We have well utilized the solar and alpha planet systems, and it is time that we move out once more. This planet is but one of a thousand Earth colonies moving out to new space.”

Euben shook his head. “What a ridiculous civilization! All space in this arc is eaber. We close the door, so—”

He made a fast gesture with his hand that tore inside of me, like a hot knife, scraping the bottom of my lungs. I was pretty much riding on my conditioning now. I was sickened, angry with Euben and his race. But it was slightly different from dealing with an Earth neighbor you dislike. Bravery and caution! Always bravery—and caution.

“So you block us here,” I said. “Perhaps we will go elsewhere for a hundred or a thousand years. It’s no use to fight over space. There are millions of planets.”

“Do you truly believe so?” smiled Euben. “Naive! The eaber do not like unknown life-forms prowling the universe. We will come to solar and alpha, as you call them, and put you on a chain like that one dead on the floor.”

“We might resist that,” I said. “How?” said Euben, bringing a black box out from under his robe.

I have had my share of black boxes in my Transstar years. Before it was barely in sight, I had retreated to my all-purpose closet. He laughed, peering at me through the observation window and tried the various rays and whatnot in his weapon. Nothing much happened for a while—heat, radiation, gas, sonic vibrations, the standard stuff. Pretty soon I knew he could take me; but it would take him about three days. Fair enough.

The eaber were tough, but not unbeatable—at least on what he had shown me.

He put away his black box. I stepped through the door. Decontamination worked all right, but the heat-reducer was wheezing like an asthma victim in a grain field.

“So. You are junior good,” said Euben. He turned and left the ship, whistling in a very Earthian way, not bothering to look back.

The other eaber remained. I offered him a cup of tea, which he drank greedily. He had something that looked a little like a serpent’s tongue which he ran quickly over the control board panels. He sniffed, tasted the instruments, the furnishings, the modest weapons and communications equipment I had. Then he stepped back.

“You will not survive eaber,” he said. He left, not bothering to step over the deboned Earthman.

I picked up the soft, cooling mass and set it on the TV cradle. I didn’t call through channels. I slapped the Transstar Central button and let
them have a look at the creature on the plate.

HENNESSY was on the monitor at Transstar Prime, near Mars. He gasped. “That’s not good,” he said. “Just a minute.”

I sank into the chair and made more tea with shaking hands. The screen above me lighted and I was staring at Twelve. Thirteen is as high as you get in Transstar. “You’ve bought it,” he said. “In your arc you have the only mind-contact with the eaber. Elsewhere they’ve only made patrol war.”

“Anybody solved them?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” said Twelve Jackson slowly. “They can hit us with a freeze-burn system they’ve got. Explodes you. We can reach them with most of our conventional, but they don’t die easily. Range and depth of their civilization, unknown.”

I told him about their trillion — according to Euben. Then I asked, “What’s my condition?”

Jackson hesitated and I saw his hands twiddle over his buttons. “Condition orange,” he said, taking me off white. Power reached through space. In seventy-five seconds I could feel the sudden, subtle shift in the ship’s power fields, as they built up.

“Don’t get excited,” he said. “I’ve got a dozen oranges on the board.”

“What about the colony here?” I said.

“A colony is a local situation,” said Jackson. “Unfortunately, if we squandered our life-power every-time a few colonists died, we’d still be confined to the moon. They colonize of their own free will.”

I touched the dead Earthman.

“Yeah,” he said. “Nobody knew about that. It’ll get your planet plenty of free space in the TV casts. We’ll get a blubbering from the League for Space Safety.”

“It makes me want to blubber a little myself,” I said.

Twelve Jackson gave me a long, hard look. “Stay Transstar or get out,” he said.

I gave him the rest of my report-interview on the tape and tried to get some sleep. The eaber came over the colony about midnight and bombed it a little, and I groaned awake.

It must have been a half-hour later that I heard a scratching on the ship’s window. It was Rackril, peering in at me.

When I joined him in the soft spring night he was excited.

“I’ve got something to show your high-falutin’ boys back at Mars,” he said. “A real something.”

We went in silence to his headquarters through the sweet night grasses of Everready. It was truly a planet of richness and beauty in a natural sense, and I thought again of the contrast of the poisoned boy and the monstrosities of human pets that the eaber had created un-
under this moon, in their eaber cities, on this fine world.

My mood was shattered the instant we stepped into Rackril’s combination mayor’s home-administration center. The Colony Correspondent had arrived.

There are simply too many Earth colonies for the space news services to cover them all. So they assign a Colony Correspondent to cover the whole arc, and you always find them where the most trouble is.

**THIS** one was a woman. She was of the young, peppy breed of females that start out life as a tomboy and remain in trouble all of their lives because they like to take chances. I was doubly disturbed. First because it meant that wildly distorted stories would soon be muddying things back in solar and alpha; second, because this cute lady reminded me of my own Alicia, who had been a Transstar agent along with me, back a seeming thousand years ago when I was merely a Four. She had the same snapping black eyes, the same statuesque figure, the same light-humored air.

“Well, so Transstar is really here!” she said. “Hey, Chief, how about a Transstar quote?”

“Young lady, I am not Chief,” I said drily. “My name is Webster, and I hold the Transstar rank of Seven, and you well know that all Transstar quotes must come from Transstar Prime.”


“Not here you won’t,” said Rackril, with authority’s natural fear of the tapes. “It’s past midnight. Go to bed. Tomorrow my tape man will give you a tour.”

She stuck out her tongue. “I’ve had the tour. They’re all alike, full of lies and grease, signifying nothing. Only thing I ever learned on an official tour was how to defend myself against the passes of the tape men.”

But she allowed herself to be pushed out. I guess it was the near-tragic urgency of our manner.

Rackril led me into an inner room. On the bed rested a woman, but there was a strangeness to her. She was ancient in her skin, yet something about her bones told you she was hardly thirty. Her flesh was blue-splotted, the eyes animal-bright. Rackril gestured at her; she whimpered and squirmed in her bed.

I laid a hand on his arm. “The eaber can hypnotize and make a hand gesture that tears you apart inside,” I said. “Don’t hold up your hands in front of her.”

“We got her story,” said Rackril, low-voiced. “She’s been prisoner to the eaber for over a year. From Colony Two, I guess. The eaber used her for — breeding.”
He led me to a smaller cot, where a blanket covered a figure. For a fleeting second I didn’t want him to pull back the blanket. He pulled it back.

The creature on the bed was dead, shot with a Colony bullet. You could tell that it was a boy about three feet long. There was Earthman in him and eaber. The head and arms were Earthian, the rest eaber. It was shocking to see the hard-muscled dwarf body under that placid, almost handsome head.

“ Barely five months, ” whispered the hag on the bed. “ Forced insemination. Always the hands twisting — always the pain. ”

“A friendly scientific experiment, ” said Rakkil. “ They want drones for the slag jobs in their cities. Jobs eaber won’t do. They’ve produced a hundred or so of those idiots from captive women colonists. Force-fed and raised — this one is barely five months old, yet look at his size! ”

I said nothing, busy with taking my tape, holding on to my objectivity through a force of will and my conditioning.

Rakkil opened the dead mouth. It was an exaggerated eaber tongue, black and reptile shaped. “ No speech, therefore no intellect. Nor does it have mind speech like true eaber. It begs for food and does crude tasks to get it. I showed it to the men. One of them shot it. Nobody blamed him. Tomorrow we’re going out and take these rats, and rescue those poor women that are still over there. Does your highness condescend to ask for a little Transstar help? ”

“ Transstar won’t like this life-form meddling, ” I said. “ This is the second time. ”

Rakkil slumped into a chair, looking at the woman who whispered some private incantation against the evils she had come to know.

“ I’ve got two thousand colonists, five hundred ships, ” he said. “ With or without your help, we’re going out tomorrow and take them. ”

“ They’ve got a few more ships, Rakkil. ”

He appeared not to hear. He sat there staring at the woman while I gathered up the eaber drone’s body to take back to my ship.

“ For God’s sake, get Transstar, ” he said, as I left, and it was a prayer.

Shortly before noon next day, Rakkil was back at my ship. He pointed to the sky over the colony, where his small fighting ships were rising. “ What did your bosses say? ” he asked.

“ They said, ” I replied, “ that Transstar has to look after the safety of the whole human race, and cannot match colonists man for man. There are safe places in alpha and solar to live — men are not ob-
ligated to seek danger. However, they are disturbed about the drone. I am to give an official protest and warning to Euben the eaber, which I have done."

"Is that all?"

I closed my eyes. "They also demoted me one rank, from a Seven to a Six, for having left my ship unattended in the middle of last night. During the time we examined the drone, a bumptious Colony Correspondent sneaked into my ship and tamed an eaber monstrosity I had on the TV plate. She flung her sensationalism to the planets and nations of alpha and solar. To put it mildly, this has rocked the Galaxy, which is fine with our Colony Correspondent. She gets paid according to the number of TV stations that play her tape."

"The universe should know!" cried Rackril.

"The universe has always known," I said. "Every history book tells of worse things in almost every Middlesex village and town. Trans- star is not in show business, nor in policy-making. It observes and objectively attends to the broad general welfare of the Earthian universe."

Rackril's voice was hoarse. "I have one empty ship," he said bitterly. "I lack a pilot. Will Transstar at least do me the favor of helping to fill that?"

"It will," I said, reaching for my combat slacks.

THIS was a wild, foolish mission, and I knew it. But I wanted to get as close as I could to eaberland, which I had only observed at a distance. And I wanted to do something about the affronts to my system.

Sometimes it's good to fire a killing ray, even if it doesn't mean much.

We passed over three middle-sized eaber cities, the queerest cities I'd ever seen.

"Practically all landing fields," said a feminine voice in my ear. I looked to my left. The Colony Correspondent was riding a patrol ship on my right. I thanked her for achieving my embarrassment.

"Oh, that's all right, Doc," she said. "You're officially. Natural enemy. You'll get in your licks."

"I'd rather take mine in kicks. And I know where I'd like to plant my foot," I said.

I got a brash laugh. Foolish girl! Women do not have to be aggressive. There's the kind that make a fetish of rushing in where brave men hesitate. On their maimed and dead persons, the news tapes fatten and flourish.

Rackril's group thought they were fighting the battle of the eon. They were trying to land at the most advanced city where the captive Earthwomen were thought to be. The action was good. I was gloriously bashed around and managed to shoot down my eaber ship.
It wasn't a difficult action for a Transstar-trained man. I was more interested in observing that the eaber had out an equal patrol of five hundred to oppose us. But, with all the noise and banging that a thousand-ship fight makes, I could observe that there were easily ten or fifteen thousand more eaber military ships on the ground we ranged over.

So the cities were not colonies. They were military bases for a large operation.

More interesting than the ships at hand were the extremely large areas being cleared and laid out for additional ship concentrations. I estimated that they could eventually base over a hundred thousand ships.

That would interest Transstar immensely.

Rackril broke off the action when he had a mere hundred ships left. We limped back to the colony without being able to land in eaber territory. In fact, I doubted if the eaber chiefs regarded this as more than a quiet afternoon's patrol action. With their layout I couldn't blame them.

We almost missed the colony and had to sweep back once more. Yes, there was my Transstar ship, glowing orangely on the ground. But what a changed ground! It was brown and bare, a desert as far as the horizon.

During Rackril's attack a secret eaber counter-attack had swept the colony's transport ships, its buildings, and Rackril's fifteen hundred colonists into oblivion.

In times of shock men do drastic — or foolish — things. Rackril's group of survivors began to bring down the cooking equipment and bedding from their ships, preparing a camp for the night on the blighted cemetery of their colony, dazed and tearful.


I noticed that Martha Stoner, the tape-girl, had at last lost some of her high gloss. She stared at the scene, stunned. I could almost calibrate the change in her, from a high-spirited girl to a shocked and understanding woman.

I couldn't hold back comment. "Now you see the frontier," I said to her. "Now you've got a real tape that all the stations can use." She shook her head dumbly. "Go home, Rackril," I advised the benumbed leader. "Take your men and go home."

He turned on me with teeth bared and lip trembling. "You — and that Transstar fraud. You let this happen! Tell your piddling button-pushers we will never go home!"

The words rang bravely on the scorched ground, while an eaber
patrol, high up, gently wafted over us on an observation mission.

I shook my head. “At least go off in the forest where you have some protection — and some wood for your fires!”

I turned to go. A clod of soil struck my back, then a small stone.

“Go, Transstar filth, go!” They were all picking up the chant now.

“I’ll file a tape all right!” cried Martha. “I can still get through to the world. The people will act, even if Transstar won’t.”

I didn’t want to run.

I swear, this was my worst moment, because I had seen this distress many times. I understood their monumental shock. But if I did not run I could be seriously disabled by their attack. At any moment one might pull a gun. My job was to remain in good health so I could observe.

So I ran towards my ship.

They followed in a ragged company, shouting, cursing, and at last pulling guns. I barely escaped into the orange-hued safety of the Transstar ship before the rays flew. The colonists danced and pranced around the ship, shooting at it and beating on it, like nothing so much as forest natives attacking an interloper. I understood and discreetly closed the portholes.

“Order them home,” I begged Twelve Jackson. “They are doomed here.”

“We don’t have the power,” said Jackson. “We can only help them home if they want to go.”

I rang up Euben on the eaber channel which I used for official communications — so far, mostly for protests. Euben made his innocent, bird-twitter laugh. “Thank you for your protest about the colony extinction,” he said. “This keeps my clerks busy. Your colony may leave at any time. In fact, I recommend this. We will need all the space on this planet very soon.”

THREE days passed.

I found the remnant of Rackril’s tattered colony in a sort of forest stockade. They were stiff with me, embarrassed about the stoning incident. They were ghost men, and a few women, going through the motions of building crude houses and planting their food.

Martha was an exception.

“They will stay,” she said proudly, her eyes glowing. “They will be buttressed by the great crusade our space tapes have started. First the story of the miserable pet-human, then the eaber drone thing, then the mass attack on the unguarded colony. Back home men are leaving their jobs, pouring their savings into fighting ships. Institutions are subscribing money. Governments are amassing new fighters. We’ve got the backing of all the thinking men in solar and alpha!”

“It is too late in civilization for

**TRANSSTAR**
an emotion-powered, unorganized mass movement to succeed,” I said. “Only Transstar is properly equipped for space war.”

“Even Transstar men are quitting to join us!” she cried.

“Possibly a few at the lower levels, Not the agents.”

“No — not the dehumanized agents! Nor the feeble old men of Transstar Prime who stole their power from the governments of men, who drool over buttons they never dare push!”

“The eaber do this to provoke us,” I said, “to show our power at their command, at their site of battle, at a time they control. That’s why Transstar Prime won’t be sucked into the trap.”

“They want to fight us. The time is now!” she said.

“The time is not yet,” I said.

I went back to my lonely ship, haunted by the faces of Rackril and his men as they glowed on my report tapes. I hunted the news broadcasts of solar and alpha and watched the revulsion and convulsion of men back home — the enormous waste of the emotional jag. I saw ships starting from Earth to reach us, ill-prepared even to reach the moon, hurling across space vastnesses to become derelicts. I saw men throwing their pocket money at passing paraders of the anti-eaber crusade, normal shipping woefully hampered by the ridiculous items being sent to Rackril’s defenders. Government leaders, sensing the temper of the voters, threw their weight at Transstar Prime, calling for action. They got nowhere. Transstar resists temporary popular politics just as it does local situations.

“You certainly can’t call this a local situation!” I told Twelve Jackson.

He sighed. “No, not any more. But the principle is missing. Everybody’s mad, but the eaber haven’t yet posed a major threat to the human race.”

“They’ve got a couple hundred thousand fighting ships at our perimeter,” I said.

“They haven’t invaded territory we call our own. All the fighting is in no-man’s land. We’re trained to determine a real danger from a false one, and so far they don’t seem to be a real danger.”

“It can get late fast,” I said.

“Are you ready to ask for Condition Prime Total Red?”

There was a silence while I tried to separate my sympathetic feelings from the intelligence of the military situation. “No, sir,” I said.

“Thirteen Mayberry agrees with you,” said the Twelve, looking over his shoulder, and then I saw the shadow of a sleeve of the top man. Transstar’s Prime Prime, as the agents half-jokingly called him.

At least the desiccated old men near Mars were getting more interested.
On the day the first Earth-crusade task force arrived, both Martha and Rackril came to the ship.

"You know it's the end of Transstar," Martha told me. She was more subdued and serious, but she still had the high-school glow of mysticism in her eyes. "The people have been sold out for the last time."

"No one's been sold out," I said. "We are in a painful contact with a race that is both powerful and primitive. They can't be reasoned with, yet we can't blow them up until, at least, they give evidence that they intend to blow us up. So far it's only a border incident, as they used to be called in one-world days."

"We aren't waiting," said Martha. "Five thousand ships! The first wave of the anti-eaber crusade will attack soon."

Martha put me so much in mind of Alicia — the way she held her head, the way she moved her hands. Once both Alicia and I had been at a point of resigning from Transstar and leading normal lives. But something in the blood and bone had made our marriage to Transstar stronger — until she was killed on a mission, and it was forever too late for me to quit. I was aware that I was too loyal to the organization, which was, after all, merely another society of men.

Yet, right now, I found myself questioning Prime's judgment.

Certainly they could have given me power to negotiate for the colony with Euben. Certainly there were some potent weapons, short of total war, which we could have used on these vain primitives as easily as the ones they used on us. Nor need I have been brought to my knees in front of Euben.

Yet my orders were to observe — report — take no action.

We went aloft to watch the Earthmen's attack. Both Martha and Rackril were set for an initial penetration to the first eaber city. As the massive fleet from Earth wheeled in from space and went directly to the attack, they cheered like students in a rooting section. I cautioned them that five thousand ships, strained from a long flight from alpha, could hardly upset the eaber.

"It's only the first group!" cried Martha. "This is only the glorious beginning!"

The eaber took no chances. They lofted fifteen thousand ships and pulled the Earthmen into a box.

It took them about four hours to defeat the Earth attack. When the four hours passed, only about three hundred of the Earth fleet remained to sink to the oblivion of Rackril's colony and lick their wounds.

"No matter," said Martha as we landed. "There will be more tomorrow and the day after that and af-
ter that. We'll blacken the skies with ships."

But she went quickly, avoiding my eyes.

"You'll always have sanctuary on my ship," I told Rackril as he went.

"Your ship!" he snorted. "After today I'd rather trust my own stockade when Euben comes around. Incidentally, he has been kidnapping my work parties. Tell him we don't like that. Tell him we've been able to catch a few eaber, and when we do we cut them into four equal parts while they're still alive."

"Please don't," I said.

EUBEN came along as I was having my evening tea. "Ah, my scholarly friend with the glasses and the tea-drinking, the big words and the scoldings. I must thank you for keeping at least a part of our fleet in practice. A rather nice patrol action today, Webster. Is that your Transstar?"

"No. I ask you now what your intentions are as to this planet and our future relations," I said, aware that Transstar Prime, through this ship, had been watching the long day's affairs.

Euben had brought his friend with him. They both lolled at their ease in my cabin.

"It has been hard to determine," said Euben, "We have finally decided that, rather than waste rays killing off all Earthmen, we shall simply turn them into eaber. An inferior eaber, but still eaber. We have taken a few samples from Rackril's post as prototypes."

"This is forbidden!" I snapped. "You will declare war?" asked Euben eagerly. I thought his eagerness had grown.

"We don't know whom we deal with," I said. "You may be only a patrol captain, with a small command."

"I could also be commander-in-chief of all the eaber in space," said Euben. "Which I happen to be."

He said it too offhandedly to be a lie, although I suspected he was really deputy commander to the silent eaber who stood behind him.

"Then I formally demand that you cease and desist all harassments, mutilations and hostilities against humans," I said.

Euben looked at me a long time. Then he held out what could reasonably be called an arm, which his companion grasped.

My ship seemed to whirl about me. It was no such thing. Instead I was suspended upside down in the air over my desk, and Euben and the other left the ship. "Farewell, brave-foolish," called Euben mockingly. "Next time I come it is to collect you for eaberization!"

His laugh was proud and full of confidence.

When I finally managed to right myself and get back behind my
desk, I called Transstar Prime and
got Twelve Jackson. I feared I saw
a flick of amusement in his eyes.
“They are determined now for
war,” I said. “How do we stand?”

“You continue to observe,” said
Jackson. “Point Everready is not
necessary to Earth. And you have
not convinced us that a battle needs
to be fought.”

I had not convinced them. But
what did I — a mere agent — have
to do with it?

I rang off and closed the ship,
in sorrow and anger. I had been
aloof from the situation, to the
point where Euben had stood me
on my head and threatened to cap-
ture me bodily.

I put on my combat slacks and
broke out my weapons. Transstar
could remain uninvolved, but I
wasn’t going to sit at my desk, be
stood on my ear and blithely be
turned into an eaber all for the
glory of the organization.

I rode over to Rackril’s stockade
full of cold purpose.

I was no rugged-primitive colo-
nist. I was a trained agent, with
quite a few good weapons and con-
siderable experience in hostilities,
especially against alien life-forms.
Euben would have no easy time
taking me.

I found Rackril in more trouble.
“Look,” he fumed, pointing to a
dead eaber at the wall of the stock-
ade. “We shot this fellow. Look
closely.”

It was easy to see that it was
one of his own colonists, upon
which extensive biology had been
used to turn him into something
eaber-like.

“It’s going to happen to us all,”
shuddered Martha. “The crusade
has collapsed. There’ll be no more
Earth ships. Distances are too great
— governments are too busy with
their home affairs. We have been
outlawed in all major planets.”

I stared at the white-faced colo-
nist leaders in distaste.

“For God’s sake, quit sniveling
and feeling sorry for yourselves,” I
said. “We’re going to fight these
beasts and do it right. First, I want
an antenna. I can draw power from
my ship that the eaber can’t crack.
Second, I want to fight an eaber-
type war. Get your colonists to-
gether for indoctrination. These
eaber have primitive mind-reading
abilities; I want to start training
our men to set up mind guards
against that. Last, we’re going to
dig some tunnels in this ground and
blow the eaber into orbit. They
don’t like things underground.
They have no defense for it. So
let’s get organized!”

“Thank God!” cried Martha.
“Transstar is coming in at last.”

“No,” I said. “Just Charles Web-
ster.”

We fought the eaber for twen-
ty days.

They couldn’t penetrate the
power wall I set up with the help of the ship, using Transstar power. They couldn’t waylay our work parties in the woods after I taught them how to use mind-blocks which were meaningless to the eaber.

We got our tunnel through and blew up one third of an eaber city with one of my strontium 90 pills. We were also able to capture a few eaber patrol ships and send them right back, with fair-sized atomic blasts. The rest we manned and used against the eaber. They were totally confused with being attacked by their own ships. It wasn’t enough to destroy a twentieth of their operation. But it kept them busy.

I was never once outside my combat slacks.

I got little sleep. I lived for the present moment, working hand and shoulder with Rackril’s men. When disaster came, it came all at once.

I led a night patrol to place the next strontium 90 pill overland — tunneling was too slow. I caught an eaber freeze-ray that shattered my leg. In the confusion we lost Martha to the eaber, which I only learned when I’d been carried back to the stockade.

When dawn broke, Rackril shook me out of a dazed sleep.

“Look,” he said.

“Ten thousand ships to destroy two dozen men,” I laughed. “It’s all right, Alicia.”

Rackril slapped my face. “Better come out of it, Webster. Can we stand an attack like that?”

I gulped a wake-up pill and brought myself alert. “No, we cannot. This is our day for extinction. Our only decision now is to pick the time and place of our going. Let’s get over to the Transstar ship as fast as possible.”

“I’m not leaving Point Ever-ready,” growled Rackril.

“Nor am I,” I said. “Let’s move, man.”

It was a sticky hour getting back to my ship. By that time our stockade, power block and all, had been pulverized to dust behind us by the attacking weight of the eaber ships.

“Take me up, Rackril,” I said as we reached the bottom of the ship. “I can’t climb any more.”

He pointed up dumbly. The fox face of Euben and his eternal companion grinned down at us. I shifted out a gun and took off the safety. “Take me up, Rackril.”

It was almost ceremonial as Rackril and the bare half-dozen who had made it through gathered about me in the cabin. I eased painfully into my chair. Euben saw my leg and grinned. “Looks like an amputation before we can make you a useful eaber,” he said.

My bullet skipped across his shoulder. “Stand over by that wall, you,” I said. “You, Euben! I’m talking to you.”

“You cannot order me,” he said,
but he moved back sprightly enough. “I humor you, you see,” he said. “Your stockade is gone. You have nothing but this ship. I have decided to have it gently blasted into space as worthless junk.”

He gestured out of the window, where his ships were making passes now. My Transstar ship shuddered. “We can bounce it off the planet like a harmless rubber ball,” he said. He gestured in back of me. “I have also returned your woman of whom you think so much. She is worthless to become an eaber.”

I TURNED and saw the thin shape of what had once been Martha, huddled on my navigator’s bench. It was obvious that they had treated her roughly. From the trickle of blood at her mouth, she was badly hemorrhaged. She could not live.

I stared down at her. It was hard to tell if she still recognized me. She opened her mouth slightly, and I saw the black familiar shape of the eaber reptile tongue.

I turned away, light-headed with sorrow and anger.

I jabbed a button and looked up at the tall TV. It wasn’t Twelve Jackson. It was Thirteen Mayberry, Mr. Prime himself.

“What are you staring at, you old goat?” I cried, a little hysterically. “Sore because I took action to save my own hide?”

“No, you young fool. I was just wondering how long you’d permit this minor outrage to go on.”

“It ends now!” I said. “Listen, Prime, I have Earth people here who demand sanctuary of Transstar.”

“You have it,” he said. “We will up that ship, son. No power in the universe will keep it on the ground.”

“The eaber are upping it quite nicely, thanks,” I said. “But we don’t want it upped!”

I had to stop talking while the thudding blows of the gentle eaber rays buffeted the ship.

“Not upped?” asked Mayberry.

“No, sir, not upped. We’re staying! We hold the ground that this Transstar ship rests on, in the name of Earth. It isn’t much, only about fifty feet long and twenty-five wide, but it’s Earth territory. No race or force may deprive us of our real estate.”

“You tell him!” cried Rackril.

I turned to Euben. “Now, friend,” I said, “just ease this ship back to our ground. It’s Earth ground. We intend to hold it!”

“Your leg-wound has made you mad,” said Euben, with a shrug. “We have decided that you are not even worthy to be eaber pets.”

“Last warning, Euben! You’ve got yourself a Transstar situation.”

Euben didn’t hesitate.

He turned his hands in the air.

I rolled in pain, but I kept seated. When I could see again from the
pain, I looked up. Mayberry and Jackson and Hennessy and the forty-one division commanders of Transstar were blazing from the wall. The TV looked like a Christmas tree.

"Transstar orders this ship down, and that ground preserved in the name of Earth-alpha!" said Mayberry shortly to Euben.

Euben looked at the old man and shook his head. "Madmen," he said. "I spit on you." He spit on the screen at Mayberry. He had learned Earth insults well.

"My condition is Prime Total Red," I told Mayberry.

He leaned forward and closed the seldom-closed circuit at Transstar Prime.

"Your condition is Prime Total Red, and your ship is now command post for all Earth-alpha star power."

I leaned over and tapped a button. We left Point Everready in a beautiful swoop that only a Transstar ship could perform. I held us high in the atmosphere over the planet and looked sadly down. It had been a beautiful planet.

I hit another button and looked up at the forty-one division commanders of Transstar. "Your orders are to destroy the eaber," I said.

I sat back. For a few seconds it was deathly silent, while Euben
sputtered and fuzzed about his quick ride up over the planet. Then there was the faintest whisper of something — back and out and behind us.

"Brace yourselves, folks," I told the Earthmen. "It's going to be loud and crowded around here!"

Euben jabbered at some kind of communicator he held in his hands. His partner likewise gabbled.

"We have a hundred and fifty thousand ships," he told me. "We'll tear you to shreds!"

I kicked a chair over at him. "Sit down. You're going to want to sit in a minute."

"Something's wrong with the ship!" cried Rackril. "It's heavy and dead!"

"We're drawing most of the broadcast power this side of Mars," I said. "In a minute you'll be glad we have that protection!"

Transstar came then. The fast patrols whisked out of black space and leaped into our atmosphere like gleaming fish that fired a rocking blast of weaponry and were gone to rendezvous, reform and pass again. They were like nothing the eaber had ever seen. They were made for a star-go like this, a burst of light, a dazzle and a thunder that came and came and came. Behind them came the light patrols and then the medium patrols and then the heavy patrols and then the fast light shock ships and then the medium shock
ships and then the heavy shocks, wave upon wave, upon wave.

Even wrapped in our thick blanket of power we were stunned.

The planet came alight like a pearl below us. The air was jammed with sound shocks, the dazzle was like a spreading, thickening bomb of light that transfixed the eyeballs even through the dark screens I had set up.

“This is early stuff,” I told Euben conversationally. “They just do a little holding till the important ships arrive. Patrols and first shocks — the usual things, you know.”

Euben’s mouth was open. He took time to swallow before he screamed orders to his ships below.

The patrols and shocks were suddenly past firing range. For a moment you could see the planet through the haze. Its shore lines and rivers had sickened and wavered. The eaber ships, which had been a blanket, were a tattered rag.

Hennessy, the headquarters jokester, couldn’t resist a comment that probably earned him a fine. “Here comes the Cavalry,” he said over the TV.

And they came.

It was good professional stuff, geared to star action. Now we had the regulars. They came in waves of ten thousand, which was a wee bit impressive, I thought. There were the ground regulars, the medium regulars and the high regulars, each division with thirty categories, each category with its subdivisions of missiles, rockets and drones. The atmosphere screamed at us. The density of the light assumed sun proportions, and our poor little ship was like a chip on an angry ocean. Rackril had his mouth wide open. He was yelling to relieve his tension at the awesome sight; the others were lost in the overwhelming cataclysm of it. I had seen it in movies.

I poured myself a cup of tea.

“These are just the on-call regulars,” I told Euben. “Of course, you realize that in a Prime Red we’re getting total mobilization. We’ll get slightly less than a million ships in the first hour. The rest will come later.”

Euben had stopped shouting orders. He stared at me. He said something that I couldn’t hear. The pounding went on for fifteen minutes; then the planet cleared. There weren’t any shore lines or rivers any more. There weren’t very many eaber ships.

“Stop it,” he said.

I shook my head. “Sorry. A Prime Red can’t be stopped easily. Once the momentum starts it has to run its course. Get set now. Here come your specials.”

As the specials started to arrive, I taunted the Division Commanders. “Transstar is getting rusty. You’ve hardly nicked the planet.
Can't your boys shoot properly any more?"

They came in fat and sleek. Far off they waddled and wallowed, like a bunch of old ladies hitting a bargain counter. But suddenly they were serious, close up, and I had to close the portholes against the awesome roar and light of their work. You name the ray, bullet, bomb, gas — it was there.

A half-hour later the din eased off and we looked. A large fragment of seared rock floated in space. The entire eaber fleet had long ago disappeared. So had everything else except that radioactive rock.

The last wave was the massive attack unit, very slow and lumbering compared to the others, but packed with power. The first five thousand took eager bites of the rock — and there was nothing left for the other twenty-five thousand. There was nothing left at all of Point Everready except some haze hanging below us in space. But it was too late to stop the attack.

To one side of us the returning waves began to streak by — the patrols, fast, light, medium and heavy, the shocks, first, second and third, the regulars in their streaming divisions and then the specials. Meanwhile, closer by, the second wave was coming in, first patrols and first shocks, darting a few shots to keep their hand in, at the floating dust patches.

Euben looked out and saw ships to his left and to his right and behind him and below him and above him and in all positions in between. It was such a heavy concentration that the stars were blocked out and, though no atmosphere existed for a non-existent planet, we were a planet of moving ships, ourselves creating a gravity and a stinking jet-flame atmosphere. It was a moving dream of hell, enough to make your mind crack open with the motion of it. It was the phantom action of a near-million star-ships — and another million on the way.

This was the total war capacity delivered to order.

What it cost in disruption and money and waste was incredible to contemplate. But that was Prime Total Red — everything we had. And it wasn’t at all pointless.

"The eaber surrender," said Euben.

He stood respectfully now, his commander behind him. I guess he was thinking of the remaining eaber colonies on other planets, as there was nothing left to surrender here.

I handed him a rag. "You may now wipe the spit off my TV plate receiver," I said. He did it with alacrity.

"We will go elsewhere," said Euben’s companion. "After all, space is big. There is plenty of room for two great races."

"One great race," I said.
“Of course,” he said affably. “May we have our lives spared?”
“We want you to have them — so you can take the word home.”
The action outside had stilled. I opened the ports and began to move slowly towards another planet where the eaber had dwellings, as requested by the shaken Euben. Rackril patted my shoulder. “Boy, that Transstar!” he exulted.
“It’s quite a lot,” I admitted. I painfully inched over to the stricken Martha and squeezed her hand. I thought she squeezed back. I thought I saw a flicker of joy at our success — but there was so much eaber and so much death in her eyes it was hard to know. I had to leave her then, for the medics came aboard for her.
I began to glide down on the new planet to discharge Euben and the other eaber. “Look,” I said gesturing over my shoulder. Behind us the Transstar fleet followed docilely, the mass and weight of them, guns racked and quiet, the great beast behind my tiny patrol dot.
“We’ll stay around a few days in case you want to argue some more,” I told Euben.
He shook his head. “That will not be necessary, my good friend. We are not stupid. In the future you’ll see very little of the eaber.”

THE ship settled. I opened the door and put down the ladder and Euben’s companion descended, then Euben. “I am sorry—” he began.
But I thought of Martha and the dead boy who had died on Everready and the pet human and the drone eaber and the others who had suffered and died to make this creature sorry. So I planted my good foot on his rear. He crashed into his master and they both fell in the mud at the bottom of the ladder. They got up, mud-splattered, and ran like the wind towards eaberdom, capes flying out behind them.
Rackril laughed. It was the first relaxed laugh I’d heard in all that assignment. It pulled things back to normal.
I turned back to my blazing board and hit a button. “Condition White,” I said, “and don’t kid me that you got up all these star-ships on seventy-five seconds notice. They left Earth-alpha weeks ago. You knew from the first we were in for a Condition Prime Total Red with the eaber.”
The old man grinned. “It’s the agents who louse us up. We were afraid you’d observe so long that you’d start the action on an orange and build a whole new tradition — Ten.”

Ten! I remembered then that anybody who ordered a CPTR was automatically up for Ten rank and sent to a nice, soft job at Prime.
“Save me a wide, plump chair at the TV console at Prime,” I said.
“Get me a desk-sized teapot, and a soft cushion for a bum leg.”

I turned the ship around and started to lead the massive fleet home.

I stared at the far-flung stars of space as I drank my tea, eyes blurred a little with tears. I was an organization man. The organization was all I had, or would ever have. It didn’t seem enough. Even the playing of the Transstar victory song left me depressed.

Then suddenly the light broke.

A Transstar agent is both the most and the least important of men. He is a fireman who puts out fires — a hero, but a shadow. A master sometimes, but mostly a servant. I winked at Mayberry on the screen. They saw I knew and winked back. They had finally lost a pompous, Transstar-impressed agent and gained a useful career man.

They were satisfied.
So was I.

— RAYMOND E. BANKS
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