



ISAAC ASIMOV

Gold, The Final Science Fiction Collection

Part One - The Final Stories

Hallucination

Typed by Bateau

Sam Chase arrived on Energy Planet on his fifteenth birthday.

It was a great achievement, he had been told, to have been assigned there, but he wasn't at all sure he felt that at the moment.

It meant a three-year separation from Earth and from his family, while he continued a specialized education in the field, and that was a sobering thought. It was not the sort of field of education in which he was interested, and he could not understand why Central Computer had assigned him to this project, and that was downright depressing.

He looked at the transparent dome overhead. It was quite high, perhaps a thousand meters high, and it stretched in all directions farther than he could clearly see. He asked, "Is it true that this is the only Dome on the planet, sir?" The information-films he had studied on the spaceship that had carried him here had described only one Dome, but they might have been out-of-date. Donald Gentry, to whom the question had been addressed, smiled. He was a large man, a little chubby with dark brown, good-natured eyes, not much hair, and a short graying beard.

He said, "The only one, Sam. It's quite large, though, and most of the housing facilities are underground, where you'll find no lack of space. Besides, once your basic training is done, you'll be spending most of your time in space. This is just our planetary base."

"I see, sir," said Sam, a little troubled.

Gentry said, "I am in charge of our basic trainees so I have to study their records carefully. It seems clear to me that this assignment was not your first choice. Am I right?"

Sam hesitated, and then decided he didn't have much choice to but to be honest about it. He said, "I'm not sure that I'll do as well as I would like to in gravitational engineering."

"Why not? Surely the Central Computer, which evaluated your scholastic record and your social and personal background, can be trusted in its judgement. And if you do well, it will be a great achievement for you, for right here we are on the cutting edge of a new technology."

"I know that, sir," said Sam. "Back on Earth, everyone is very excited about it. No one before has ever tried to get close to a neutron star and make use of its energy."

"Yes?" said Gentry. "I haven't been on Earth for two years. What else do they say about it? I understand there's considerable opposition?"

His eyes probed the boy.



Sam shifted uneasily, aware he was being tested. He said, "There are people on Earth who say it's all too dangerous and might be a waste of money."

"Do you believe that?"

"It might be so, but most new technologies have their dangers and many are worth doing despite that. This one is, I think."

"Very good. What else do they say on Earth?"

Sam said, "They say the Commander isn't well and that the project might fail without him." When Gentry didn't respond, Sam said, hastily, "That's what they say."

Gentry acted as though he did not hear. He put his hand on Sam's shoulder and said, "Come, I've got to show you to your Corridor, introduce you to your roommate, and explain what your initial duties will be." As they walked toward the elevator that would take them downward, he said, "What was your first choice in assignment, Chase?"

"Neurophysiology, sir."

"Not a bad choice. Even today, the human brain continues to be a mystery. We know more about neutron stars than we do about the brain, as we found out when this project first began."

"Oh?"

"Indeed! At the start, various people at the base--it was much smaller and more primitive then--reported having experienced hallucinations. They never caused any bad effects, and after a while, there were no further reports. We never found out the cause."

Sam stopped, and looked up and about again. "Was that why the Dome was built, Dr. Gentry?"

"No, not at all. We needed a place with a completely Earth-like environment, for various reasons, but we haven't isolated ourselves. People can go outside freely. There are no hallucinations being reported now."

Sam said, "The information I as given about Energy Planet is that there is no life on it except for plants and insects, and that they're harmless."

"That's right, but they're also inedible, so we grow our own vegetables, and keep some small animals, right here under the Dome. Still, we've found nothing hallucinogenic about the planetary life."

"Anything unusual about the atmosphere, sir?"

Gentry looked down from his only slightly greater height and said, "Not at all. People have camped in the open overnight on occasion and nothing has happened. It is a pleasant world. There are streams but no fish, just algae and water-insects. There is nothing to sting you or poison you. There are yellow berries that look delicious and taste terrible but do no other harm. The weather's pretty nearly always good. There are frequent light rains and it is sometimes windy, but there are no extremes of heat and cold."

"And no hallucinations any more, Dr. Gentry?"

"You sound disappointed," said Gentry, smiling.

Sam took a change. "Does the Commander's trouble have anything to do with the hallucinations, sir?"

The good nature vanished from Gentry's eyes for a moment, and then he frowned. He said, "What trouble do you refer to?"



Sam flushed and they proceeded in silence.

Sam found few others in the Corridor he had been assigned to, but Gentry explained it was a busy time at the forward station, where the power system was being built in a ring around the neutron star--the tiny object less than ten miles across that had all the mass of a normal star, and a magnetic field of incredible power.

It was the magnetic field that would be tapped. Energy would be led away in enormous amounts and yet it would all be a pinprick, less than a pinprick to the star's rotational energy, which was the ultimate source. It would take billions of years to bleed off all that energy, and in that time, dozens of populated planets, fed the energy through hyperspace, would have all they needed for an indefinite time.

Sharing his room was Robert Gillette, a dark-haired unhappy-looking young man. After cautious greetings had been exchanged, Robert revealed the fact that he was sixteen and had been "grounded" with a broken arm, though the fact didn't show since it had been pinned internally.

Robert said, ruefully, "It takes a while before you learn to handle things in space. They may not have weight, but they have inertia and you have to allow for that."

Sam said, "They always teach you that in--" He was going to say that it was taught in fourth-grade science, but realized that would be insulting, and stopped himself.

Robert caught the implication, however, and flushed. He said, "It's easy to know it in your head. It doesn't mean that you get the proper reflexes, till you've practiced quite a bit. You'll find out."

Sam said, "Is it very complicated to get to go outside?"

"No, but why do you want to go? There's nothing there."

"Have you ever been outside?"

"Sure," but he shrugged, and volunteered nothing else.

Sam took a chance. He said, very casually, "Did you ever see one of these hallucinations they talk about?"

Robert said, "_Who_ talks about?"

Sam didn't answer directly. He said, "A lot of people used to see them, but they don't anymore. Or so they say."

"So _who_ say?"

Sam took another chance. "Or if they see them, they keep quiet about them."

Robert said gruffly, "Listen, let me give you some advice. Don't get interested in these--whatever they are. If you start telling yourself you see--uh--something, you might be sent back.. You'll lose your chance at a good education and an important career."

Robert's eyes shifted to a direct stare as he said that.

Sam shrugged and sat down on the unused bunk. "All right for this to be my bed?"

"It's the only other bed here," said Robert, still staring. "The bathroom's to your right. There's your closet, your bureau. You get half the room. There's a



gym here, a library, a dining area." He paused and then, as though to let bygones be bygones, said, "I'll show you around later."

"Thanks," said Sam. "What kind of guy is the Commander?"

"He's ace. We wouldn't be here without him. He knows more about hyperspatial technology than anyone, and he's got pull with the Space Agency, so we get the money and the equipment we need."

Sam opened his trunk and, with his back to Robert, said casually, "I understand he's not well."

"Things get him down. We're behind schedule, there are cost-overruns, and things like that. Enough to get anyone down."

"Depression, huh? Any connection, you suppose, with--"

Robert stirred impatiently in his seat, "Say, why are you so interested in all this?"

"Energy physics isn't really my deal. Coming here--"

"Well, here's where you are, mister, and you better make up your mind to it, or you'll get sent home, and then you won't be anywhere. I'm going to the library."

Sam remained in the room alone, with his thoughts.

* * *

It was not at all difficult for Sam to get permission to leave the Dome. The Corridor-Master didn't even ask the reason until he had checked him off.

"I want to get a feel for the planet, sir."

The Corridor-Master nodded. "Fair enough, but you only get three hours, you know. And don't wander out of sight of the Dome. If we have to look for you, we'll find you, because you'll be wearing this," and he held out a transmitter which Sam knew had been tuned to his own personal wavelength, one which had been assigned him at birth. "But if we have to go to that trouble, you won't be allowed out again for a pretty long time. And it won't look good on your record either. You understand?"

It won't look good on your record. Any reasonable career these days had to include experience and education in space, so it was an effective warning. No wonder people might have stopped reporting hallucinations, even if they saw them.

Even so, Sam was going to have to take his chances. After all, the Central Computer _couldn't_ have sent him here just to do energy physics. There was nothing in his record that made sense out of that.

As far as looks were concerned, the planet might have been Earth, some part of Earth anyway, some place where there were a few trees and low bushes and lots of tall grass.

There were no paths and with every cautious step, the grass swayed, and tiny flying creatures whirred upward with a soft, hissing noise of wings.

One of them landed on his finger and Sam looked at it curiously. It was very small and, therefore, hard to see in detail, but it seemed hexagonal, bulging above and concave below. There were many short, small legs so that when it



moved it almost seemed to do so on tiny wheels. There were no signs of wings till it suddenly took off, and then four tiny, feather objects unfurled.

What made the planet different from Earth, though, was the smell. It wasn't unpleasant, it was just different. The plants must have had an entirely different chemistry from those on Earth; that's why they tasted bad and were inedible. It was just luck they weren't poisonous.

The smell diminished with time, however, as it saturated Sam's nostrils. He found an exposed bit of rocky ledge he could sit on and considered the prospect. The sky was filled with lines of clouds, and the Sun was periodically obscured, but the temperature was pleasant and there was only a light wind. The air felt a bit damp, as though it might rain in a few hours.

Sam had brought a small hamper with him and he placed it in his lap and opened it. He had brought along two sandwiches and a canned drink so that he could make rather a picnic of it.

He chewed away and thought: Why should there be hallucinations? Surely those accepted for a job as important as that of taming a neutron star would have been selected for mental staility. It would be surprising to have even one person hallucinating, let alone a number of them. Was it a matter of chemical influences on the brain?

They would surely have checked that out.

Sam plucked a leaf, tore it in two and squeezed. He then put the torn edge to his nose cautiously, and took it away again. A very acrid, unpleasant smell. He tried a blade of grass. Much the same.

Was the smell enough? It hadn't made him feel dizzy or in any way peculiar. He used a bit of his water to rinse off the fingers that had held the plants and then rubbed them on his trouser leg. He finished his sandwiches slowly, and tried to see if anything else might be considered unnatural about the planet.

All that greenery. There ought to be animals eating it, rabbits, cows, whatever. Not just little insects, innumerable insects, or whatever those little things might be, with the gentle sighing of their tiny feathery wings and the very soft crackle of their munch, munch, munchings of leaves and stalks.

What if there were a cow--a big, fat cow--doing the munching? And with the last mouthful of his second sandwich between his teeth, his own munching stopped.

There was a kind of smoke in the air between himself and a line of hedges. It waved, billowed, and altered: a very thin smoke. He blinked his eyes, then shook his head, but it was still there.

he swallowed hastily, closed his lunch box, and slung it over his shoulder by its strap. He stood up.

He felt no fear. He was only excited--and curious.

The smoke was growing thicker, and taking on a shape. Vaguely, it looked like a cow, a smoky, insubstantial shape that he could see through. Was it a hallucination? A creation of his mind? He had just been thinking of a cow.

Hallucination or not, he was going to investigate.

With determination, he stepped toward the shape.

Part Two



Sam chase stepped toward the cow outlined in smoke on the strange, far planet on which his education and career were to be advanced. He was convinced there was nothing wrong with his mind. It was the "hallucination" that Dr. Gentry had mentioned, but it was no hallucination. Even as he pushed his way through the tall rank grassline greenery, he noted the silence, and knew not only that it was no hallucination, but what it really _was._ The smoke seemed to condense and grow darker, outlining the cow more sharply. It as as though the cow were being painted in the air.

Sam laughed, and shouted, "Stop! Stop! Don't use me. I don't know a cow well enough. I've only seen pictures. You're getting it all wrong."

It looked more like a caricature than a real animal and, as he cried out, the outline wavered and thinned. The smoke remained but it was as though an unseen hand had passed across the air to erase what had been written.

Then a new shape began to take form. At first, Sam couldn't quite make out what it was intended to represent, but it changed and sharpened quickly. He stared in surprise, his mouth hanging open and his hamper bumping empty against his shoulder blade.

The smoke was forming a human being. There was no mistake about it. It was forming accurately, as though it had a model it could imitate, and of course it did have one, for Sam was standing there.

It was becoming Sam, clothes and all, even the outline of the hamper and the strap over his shoulder. It was another Sam Chase.

It was still a little vague, wavering a bit, insubstantial, but it firmed as though it were correcting itself, and then, finally, it was steady.

It never became entirely solid. Sam could see the vegetation dimly through it, and when a gust of wind caught it, it moved as if it were a tethered balloon.

But it was real. It was no creation of his mind. Sam was sure of that.

But he couldn't just stand there, simply facing it. Diffidently, he said, "Hello there."

Somehow he expected the Other Sam to speak, too, and, indeed, its mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. It might just have been imitating the motion of Sam's mouth.

Sam said, again, "Hello, can you speak?"

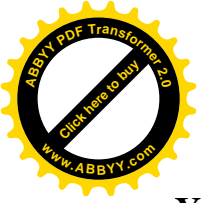
There was no sound but his own voice, and yet there was a tickling in his mind, a conviction that they could communicate.

Sam frowned. What made him so sure of that? The thought seemed to pop into his mind.

He said, "Is this what has appeared to other people, human people--my kind--on this world?"

No answering sound, but he was quite sure what the answer to his question was. This had appeared to other people, not necessarily in their own shape, but _something._ And it hadn't worked.

What made him so sure of _that?_ Where did these convictions come from in answer to his questions?



Yes, of course, they were the answers to his questions. The Other Sam was putting thoughts into his mind. It was adjusting the tiny electric currents in his brain cells so that the proper answer would arrive.

He nodded thoughtfully at that thought, and the Other Sam must have caught the significance of the gesture, for it nodded, too.

It had to be so. First a cow had formed, when Sam had thought of a cow, and then it had shifted when Sam had said the cow was imperfect. The Other Sam could grasp his thoughts somehow, and if it could grasp them, then it could modify them, too, perhaps.

Was this what telepathy was like, then? It was not like talking. It was having thoughts, except that the thoughts originated elsewhere and were not created entirely of one's own mental operations. But how could you tell your own thoughts from the thoughts imposed from outside?

Sam knew the answer to that at once. Right now, he was unused to the process. He had never had practice. With time, as he grew more skilled at it, he would be able to tell one kind of thought from another without trouble.

In fact, he could do it now, if he thought about it. Wasn't he carrying on a conversation in a way? He was wondering, and then knowing. The wondering was his own question, the knowing was the Other Sam's answer. Of course it was.

There! The "of course it was," just now, was an answer.

"Not so fast, Other Sam," said Sam, aloud. "Don't go too quickly. Give me a chance to sort things out, or I'll just get confused."

He sat down suddenly on the grass, which bent away from him in all directions.

The other Sam slowly tried to sit down as well.

Sam laughed. "Your legs are bending in the wrong place."

That was corrected at once. The Other Sam sat down, but remained very stiff from the waist up.

"Relax," said Sam.

Slowly, the Other Sam slumped flopping a bit to one side, then correcting that..

Sam was relieved. With the Other Sam so willing to follow his lead, he was sure good will was involved. It was! Exactly!

"No," said Sam. "I said, not so fast. Don't go by my thoughts. Let me speak out loud, even if you can't hear me. Then adjust my thoughts, so I'll know it's an adjustment. Do you understand?"

He waited a moment and was then sure the Other Sam understood.

Ah, the answer had come, but not right away, Good!

"Why do you appear to people?" asked Sam.

He started earnestly at the Other Sam, and knew that the Other Sam wanted to communicate with people, but had failed.

No answer to that question had really been required. The answer was obvious. But then, why had they failed?

He put it in words. "Why did you fail? You are successfully communicating with me."



Sam was beginning to learn how to understand the alien manifestation. it was as if his mind were adapting itself to a new technique of communication, just as it would adapt itself to a new language. Or was Other Sam influencing Sam's mind and teaching him the method without Sam even knowing it was being done?

Sam found himself emptying his mind of immediate thoughts. After he asked his question, he just let his eyes focus at nothing and his eyelids droop, as though he were about to drop off to sleep, and then he knew the answer. There was a little clicking, or something, in his mind, a signal that showed him something had been put in from outside.

He now knew, for instance, that the Other Sam's previous attempts at communication had failed because the people to whom it had appeared had been frightened. They had doubted their own sanity. And because they feared, their minds... tightened. Their minds would not receive. The attempts at communication gradually diminished, though they had never entirely stopped.

"But you're communicating with me," said Sam.

Sam was different from all the rest. He had not been afraid.

"Couldn't you have made them not afraid first? Then talked to them?"

It wouldn't work. The fear-filled mind resisted all. An attempt to change might damage. It would be wrong to damage a thinking mind. There had been one such attempt, but it had not worked.

"What is it you are trying to communicate, Other Sam?"

A wish to be left alone. Despair!

Despair was more than a thought; it was an emotion; it was a frightening sensation. Sam felt despair wash over him intensely heavily--and yet it was not part of himself. He felt despair on the surface of his mind, keenly, but underneath it, where his own mind was, he was free of it.

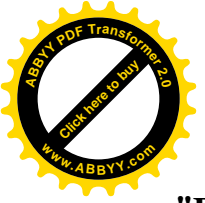
Sam said, wonderingly, "It seems to me as though you're giving up. Why? We're not interfering with you?"

Human beings had built the Dome, cleared a large area of all planetary life and substituted their own. And once the neutron star had its power station--once floods of energy moved outward through hyperspace to powerthirsty worlds--more power stations would be built and still more. Then what would happen to Home. (There must be a name for the planet that the Other Sam used but the only thought Sam found in his mind was Home and, underneath that, the thought: ours--ours--ours--)

This planet was the nearest convenient base to the neutron star. It would be flooded with more and more people, more and more Domes, and their Home would be destroyed.

"But you could change our minds if you had to, even if you damaged a few, couldn't you?"

If they tried, people would find them dangerous. People would work out what was happening. Ships would approach, and from a distance, use weapons to destroy the life on Home, and then bring in People-life instead. This could be seen in the people's minds. People had a violent history; they would stop at nothing.



"But what can I do?" said Sam. "I'm just an apprentice. I've just been here a few days. What can I do?"

Fear. Despair

There were no thoughts that Sam could work out, just the numbing layer of fear and despair.

He felt moved. It was such a peaceful world. They threatened nobody. They didn't even hurt minds when they could.

It wasn't their fault they were conveniently near a neutron star. It wasn't their fault they were in the way of expanding humanity.

He said, "Let me think."

He thought, and there was the feeling of another mind watching. Sometimes his thoughts skipped forward and he recognized a suggestion from outside.

There came the beginning of hope. Sam felt it, but wasn't certain.

He said doubtfully, "I'll try."

he looked at the time-strip on his wrist and jumped a little. Far more time had passed than he had realized.

His three hours were nearly up. "I must go back now," he said.

He opened his lunch hamper and removed the small thermos of water, drank from it thirstily, and emptied it. He placed the empty thermos under one arm.

He removed the wrappings of the sandwich and stuffed it in his pocket.

The OTHER Sam wavered and turned smoky. The smoked thinned, dispersed and was gone.

Sam closed the hamper, swung its strap over his shoulder again and turned toward the Dome.

His heart was hammering. Would he have the courage to go through with his plan? And if he did, would it work?

When Sam entered the Dome, the Corridor-Master was waiting for him and said, as he looked ostentatiously at his own time-strip, "You shaved it rather fine, didn't you?"

Sam's lips tightened and he tried not to sound insolent. "I had three hours, sir."

"And you took two hours and fifty-eight minutes."

"That's less than three hours, sir."

"Hmm." The Corridor-Master was cold and unfriendly. "Dr. Gentry would like to see you."

"Yes, sir. What for?"

"He didn't tell me. But I don't like you cutting it that fine your first time out, Chase, And I don't like your attitude either, and I don't like an officer of the Dome wanting to see you. I'm just going to tell you once, Chase--if you're a troublemaker I won't want you in this Corridor. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. But what trouble have I made?"

"We'll find that out soon enough."

* * *



Sam had not seen Donald Gentry since their one and only meeting the day the young apprentice had reached the Dome. Gentry still seemed good natured and kindly, and there was nothing in his voice to indicate anything else. He sat in a chair behind his desk, and Sam stood before it, his hamper still bumping his shoulder blade.

Gentry said, "How are you getting along, Sam? Having an interesting time?"

"Yes, sir," said Sam.

"Still feeling you'd rather be doing something else, working somewhere else?"

Sam said, earnestly, "No, sir. This is a good place for me."

"Because you're interested in hallucinations?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've been asking others about it, haven't you?"

"It's an interesting subject to me, sir."

"Because you want to study the human brain?"

"Any brain, sir."

"And you've been wandering about outside the Dome, haven't you?"

"I was told it was permitted, sir."

"It is. But few apprentices take advantage of that so soon. Did you see anything interesting?"

Sam hesitated, then said, "Yes, sir."

"A hallucination?"

"No, sir." He said it quite positively.

Gentry stared at him for a few moments, and there was a kind of speculative hardening of his eyes. "Would you care to tell me what you did see?"

Honestly."

Sam hesitated again. Then he said, "I saw and spoke to an inhabitant of this planet, sir."

"An intelligent inhabitant, young man?"

"Yes, sir."

Gentry said, "Sam, we had reason to wonder about you when you came. The Central Computer's report on you did not match our needs, though it was favourable in many ways, so I took the opportunity to study you that first day. We kept our collective eye on you, and when you left to wander about the planet on your own, we kept you under observation."

"Sir," said Sam, indignantly. "That violates my right of privacy."

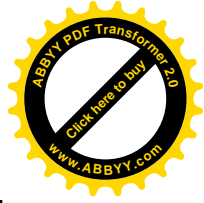
"Yes, it does, but this is a most vital project and we are sometimes driven to bend the rules a little. We saw you talking with considerable animation for a substantial period of time."

"I just told you I was, sir."

"Yes, but you were talking to nothing, to empty air. You were experiencing a hallucination, Sam!"

Part Three

Sam Chase was speechless. A hallucination? It couldn't be a hallucination. Less than half an hour ago, he had been speaking to the Other Sam, had been experiencing the thoughts of the Other Sam. He knew exactly what had



happened then, and he was still the same Sam Chase he had been during that conversation and before. He put his elbow over his lunch hamper as if it were a connection with the sandwiches he had been eating when the Other Sam had appeared.

He said, with what was almost a stammer, "Sir--Dr. Gentry--it wasn't a hallucination. It was real."

Gentry shook his head. "My boy, I saw you talking with animation to nothing at all. I didn't hear what you said, but you were talking. Nothing else was there except plants. Nor was I the only one. There were two other witnesses, and we have it all on record."

"On record?"

"On a television cassette. Why should we lie to you, young man? This has happened before. At the start it happened rather frequently. Now it happens only very rarely. For one thing, we tell the new apprentices of the hallucinations at the start, as I told you, and they generally avoid the planet until they are more acclimated, and then it doesn't happen to them.

"You mean you scare them," blurted out Sam, "so that it's not likely to happen. And they don't tell you if it does happen. But I wasn't scared."

Gentry shook his head. "I'm sorry you weren't, if that was what it would have taken you to keep from seeing things."

"I wasn't seeing things. At least, nothing things that weren't there."

"How do you intend to argue with a television cassette, which will show you staring at nothing?"

"Sir, what I saw was not opaque. It was smoky, actually; foggy, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. It looked as a hallucination might look, not as reality. But the television set would have seen even smoke."

"Maybe not, sir. My mind must have been focused to see it more clearly. It was probably less clear to the camera than to me."

"It focused your mind, did it?" Gentry stood up, and he sounded rather sad.

"That's an admission of hallucination. I'm really sorry, Sam, because you are clearly intelligent, and the central Computer rated you highly, but we can't use you."

"Will you be sending me home, sir?"

"Yes, but why should that matter? You didn't particularly want to come here."

"I want to stay here _now._"

"But I'm afraid you cannot."

"You can't just send me home. Don't I get a hearing?"

"You certainly can, if you insist, but in that case, the proceedings will be official and will go on your record, so that you won't get another apprenticeship anywhere. As it is, if you are sent back unofficially, as better suited to an apprenticeship in neurophysiology, you might get that, and be better off, actually, than you are now."

"I don't want that. I want a hearing--before the Commander."

"Oh, no. Not the Commander. He can't be bothered with that."

"It must be the Commander," said Sam, with desperate force, "or this Project will fail."



"Unless the Commander gives you a hearing? Why do you say that? Come, you are forcing me to think that you are unstable in ways other than those involved with hallucinations."

"Sir." The words were tumbling out of Sam's mouth now. "The Commander is ill--they know that even on Earth--and if he gets too ill to work, this Project will fail. I did not see a hallucination and the proof is that I know why he is ill and how he can be cured."

"You're not helping yourself," said Gentry.

"If you send me away, I tell you the Project will fail. Can it hurt to let me see the Commander? All I ask is five minutes."

"Five minutes? What if he refuses?"

"_Ask_ him, sir. Tell him that I say the same thing that caused his depression can remove it."

"No, I don't think I'll tell him that. But I'll ask him if he'll see you."

The Commander was a thin man, not very tall. His eyes were a deep blue and they looked very tired.

His voice was very soft, a little low-pitched, definitely weary.

"You're the one who saw the hallucination?"

"It was not a hallucination, Commander. It was real. So was the one _you_ saw, Commander." If that did not get him thrown out, Sam thought, he might have a chance. He felt his elbow tightening on his hamper again. He still had it with him.

The Commander seemed to wince. "The one _I_ saw?"

"Yes, Commander. It said it had hurt one person. They had to try with you because you were the Commander, and they... did damage."

The Commander ignored that and said, "Did you ever have any mental problems before you came here?"

"No, Commander. You can consult my Central Computer record."

Sam thought: _He_ must have had problems, but they let it go because he's a genius and they had to have him.

Then he thought: Was that my own idea? Or had it been put there?

The Commander was speaking. Sam had almost missed it. He said, "What you saw can't be real. There is no intelligent life-form on this planet."

"Yes, sir. There is."

"Oh? And no one ever discovered it till you came here, and in three days you did the job?" The Commander smiled very briefly. "I'm afraid I have no choice but to--"

"Wait, Commander," said Sam, in a strangled voice. "We know about the intelligent life-form. It's the insects, the little flying things."

"You say the insects are intelligent?"

"Not an individual insect by itself, but they fit together when they want to, like little jigsaw pieces. They can do it any way they want. And when they do, their nervous systems fit together, too, and build up. A lot of them _together_ are intelligent."



The Commander's eyebrows lifted. "That's an interesting idea, anyway. Almost crazy enough to be true. How did you come to that conclusion, young man?"

"By observation, sir. Everywhere I walked, I disturbed the insects in the grass and they flew about in all directions. But once the cow started to form, and I walked toward it, there was nothing to see or here. The insects were gone. They gathered together in front of me and they weren't in the grass anymore. That's how I knew."

"You talked with a cow?"

"It was a cow at first, because that's what I thought of. But they had it wrong, so they switched and came together for form a human being--_me._"

"You?" And then, in a lower voice, "Well, that fits anyway."

"Did you see it that way too, Commander?"

The Commander ignored that. "And when it shaped itself like you, it could talk as you did? Is that what you're telling me?"

"No, Commander. The talking was in my mind."

"Telepathy?"

"Sort of."

"And what did it say to you, or think to you?"

"It wanted us to refrain from disturbing this planet. It wanted us not to take it over." Sam as all but holding his breath. The interview had lasted more than five minutes already, and the Commander was making no move to put an end to it, to send him home.

"Quite impossible."

"Why, Commander?"

"Any other base will double and triple the expense. We're having enough trouble getting grants as it is. Fortunately, it is all a hallucination, young man, and the problem does not arise." He closed his eyes, then opened them and looked at Sam without really focusing on him. "I'm sorry, young man. You will be sent back--officially."

Sam gambled again. "We can't afford to ignore the insects, Commander. They have a lot to give us."

The Commander had raised his hand halfway as though about to give a signal. He paused long enough to say, "Really? What do they have that they can give us?"

"The one thing more important than energy Commander. An understanding of the brain."

"How do you know that?"

"I can demonstrate it. I have them here." Sam seized his hamper and swung it forward onto the desk.

"What's that?"

Sam did not answer in words. He opened the hamper, and a softly whirring, smoky cloud appeared.

The Commander rose and suddenly cried out. He lifted his hand high as an alarm bell sounded.



Through the door came Gentry, and others behind him. Sam felt himself seized by the arms, and then a kind of stunned and motionless silence prevailed in the room.

The smoke was condensing, wavering, taking on the shape of a Head, a thin head, with high cheekbones, a smooth forehead and a receding hairline. It had the appearance of the Commander.

"I'm seeing things," croaked the Commander.

Sam said, "We're all seeing the same thing, aren't we?" He wriggled and was released.

Gentry said in a low voice, "Mass hysteria."

"No," said Sam, "it's real." He reached toward the Head in midair, and brought back his finger with a tiny insect on it. He flicked it and it could just barely be seen making its way back to its companions.

No one moved.

Sam said, "Head, do you see the problem with the Commander's mind?"

Sam had the brief vision of a snarl in an otherwise smooth curve, but it vanished and left nothing behind. It was not something that could be easily put into human thought. He hoped the others experienced that quick snarl. Yes, they had. He knew it.

The Commander said, "There is no problem."

Sam said, "Can you adjust it, Head?"

Of course, they could not. It was not right to invade a mind.

Sam said, "Commander, give permission."

The Commander put his hands to his eyes and muttered something Sam did not make out. Then he said, clearly, "It's a nightmare, but I've been in one since-- Whatever must be done, I give permission."

Nothing happened.

Or nothing seemed to happen.

And then slowly, little by little, the Commander's face lit in a smile.

He said, just above a whisper. "Astonishing. I'm watching a sun rise. It's been cold night for so long, and now I feel the warmth again." His voice rose high.

"I feel wonderful."

The head deformed at that point, turned into a vague, pulsing fog, then formed a curving, narrowing aorrow that sped into the hamper. Sam snapped it shut.

He said, "Commander, have I your permission to resotre these little insect-things to their own world?"

"Yes, yes," said the Commander, dismissing that with a wave of his hand.

"Gentry, call a meeting, we've got to change all our plans."

Sam had been escorted outside the Dome by a stolid guard and had then been confined to his quarters for the rest of the day.

It was late when Gentry entered, stared at him thoughtfully, and said, "That was an amazing demonstration of yours. The entire incident has been fed into the Central Computer and we now have a double project--neutron-star energy and neurophysiology. I doubt that there will be any question about pourind money into this project now. And we'll have a group of neurophysiologists



arriving eventually. Until then you're going to be working with those little things and you'll probably end up the most important person here."

Sam said, "But will we leave their world to them?"

Gentry said, "We'll have to if we expect to get anything out of them, won't we? The Commander thinks we're going to build elaborate settlements in orbit about this world and shift all operations to them except for a skeleton crew in this Dome to maintain direct contact with the insects--or whatever we'll decide to call them. It will cost a great deal of money, and take time and labor, but it's going to be worth it. No one will question that."

Sam said "Good!"

Gentry stared at him again, longer and more thoughtfully than before.

"My boy," he said, "it seems that what happened came about because you did not fear the supposed hallucination. Your mind remained open, and that was the whole difference. Why was that? Why weren't you afraid?"

Sam flushed. "I'm not sure, sir. As I look back on it, though, it seemed to me I was puzzled as to why I was sent here. I had been doing my best to study neurophysiology through my computerized courses, and I knew very little about astrophysics. The Central Computer had my record, all of it, the full details of everything I had ever studied and couldn't imagine why I had been sent here.

"Then, when you first mentioned the hallucinations, I thought, 'That must be it. I was sent here to look into it.' I just made up my mind that was the thing I had to do. I had no time to be afraid, Dr. Gentry. I had a problem to solve and I--I had faith in the Central Computer. It wouldn't have sent me here, if I weren't up to it."

Gentry shook his head. "I'm afraid I wouldn't have had had that much faith in that machine. But they say faith can move mountains, and I guess it did in this case."