

## PARD

Some partnerships are brought about my chance, some by force, some by mutual consent. Some partnerships need to be broken up, for the good of the partners. But then there are certain kinds of partners that cannot be separated.

## F. PAUL WILSON

The orbital survey had indicated this clearing as the probable site of the crash, but long-range observation had turned up no signs of wreckage. Steven Dalt was doing no better at close range. Something had landed here with tremendous impact not too long ago: there was a deep furrow, a few of the trees were charred, and the grass had not yet been able to fully cover the earth-scar. So far, so good. But where was the wreckage? He had made a careful search of the trees around the clearing and there was nothing of interest there. It was obvious now that there would be no quick, easy solution to the problem as he had originally hoped, so he started the half-kilometer trek back to his concealed shuttlecraft.

Topping a leafy rise, he heard a shout off to his left and turned to see a small party of mounted colonists, Tependians by their garb. The odd-ity of the sight struck him. They were well inside the Duchy of Bendelema and that shouldn't be: Bendelema and Tependia had been at war for generations. Dalt shrugged and started walking again. He'd been away for years, and it was very pos-sible that something could have hap-pened in that time to soften relations between the two duchies. Change was the rule on a splinter world.

One of the colonists pointed an unwieldy apparatus at Dalt and something went *thip* past his head. Dalt went into a crouch and ran to his right. There had been at least one change since his departure: someone had reinvented the crossbow.

The hooves of the Tependian mounts thudded in pursuit as he raced down the slope into a dank, twilight grotto, and Dalt redoubled his speed as he realized how simple it would be for his pursuers to sur-round and trap him in this sunken area. He had to gain the high ground on the other side before he was en-circled. Halfway up the far slope, he was halted by the sound of hooves ahead of him. They had succeeded in cutting him off.

Dalt turned and made his way carefully down the slope. If he could just keep out of sight, they might think he had escaped the ring they had thrown around the grotto. Then, when it got dark

A bolt smashed against a stone by his foot. "There he is!" someone cried and Dalt was on the run again.

He began to weigh the situation in his mind. If he kept on running, they were bound to keep on shooting at him and one of them just might put a bolt through him. If he stopped running, he might have a chance. They might let him off with his life. Then he remembered that he was dressed in serfs clothing and serfs who ran from anyone in uniform were usually put to the sword. Dalt kept running.

Another bolt flashed by, this one ripping some bark off a nearby tree. They were closing in—they were ob-viously experienced at this sort of work—and it wouldn't be long before Dalt was trapped at the lowest point of the grotto with nowhere else to go.

Then he saw the cave mouth, a wide, low arch of darkness just above him on the slope. It was about a meter and a half high at its central point. With a shower of crossbow bolts raining around him, Dalt quickly ducked inside.

It wasn't much of a cave. In the dark and dampness Dalt soon found that it rapidly narrowed to a tunnel too slender for his shoulders to pass. There was nothing else for him to do but stay as far back as possible and hope for the best . . . which wasn't much no matter how he looked at it. If his pursuers didn't feel like com-ing in to drag him out, they could just sit back and fill the cave with bolts. Sooner or later one would have to strike him. Dalt peered out the opening to see which it would be.

But his five pursuers were doing nothing. They sat astride their mounts and stared dumbly at the cave mouth. One of the party unstrung his crossbow and began to strap it to his back. Dalt had no time to wonder at their behavior for in that instant he realized that he had made a fatal error. He was in a cave on Kwashi and there was hardly a cave on Kwashi that didn't have its own colony of alarets.

He jumped into a crouch and sprinted for the outside. He'd gladly take his chances against crossbows rather than alarets any day. But a warm furry oval fell from the cave ceiling and landed on his head as he began to move. As his ears roared and his vision turned orange and green and yellow, Dalt screamed in agony and fell to the cave floor.

Hearing that scream, the five Te-pendian scouts shook their heads and turned and rode away.

It was dark when he awoke and he was cold and alone ... and alive.

That last part surprised him when he remembered his situation and he lost no time in crawling out of the cave and into the clean air under the open stars. Hesitantly, he reached up and peeled off the shrunken, desiccated remains of one dead alaret from his scalp. He marveled at the thing in his hand. Nowhere in the history of Kwashi, neither in the records of its long-extinct native race nor in the memory of anyone in its degenerated splinter colony, had there ever been mention of someone surviving the attack of an alaret.

The original splinter colonists had found artifacts of an ancient native race soon after their arrival. The culture had reached pre-industrial levels before it was unaccountably wiped out; a natural cataclysm of some sort was given the blame. But among the artifacts were found some samples of symbolic writing, and one of these samples—evidently aimed at the children of the race—strongly warned against the entering of any cave. Creatures described as the *kill-ing-things-on-the-ceilings-of-caves* would attack anything that entered. The writing warned: "Of every thousand struck down, nine hundred and ninety-nine will die."

William Alaiet, a settler with some zoological training, had heard the translation and decided to find out just what it was all about. He went into the first cave he could find and emerged seconds later, screaming and clawing at the furry little thing on his head. He became the first of many fatalities attributed to the *kill-ing-things-on-the-ceilings-of-caves* which were named "alarets" in his honor.

Dalt threw the alaret husk aside, got his bearings and headed for his hidden shuttlecraft. He anticipated little trouble this time. No scouting party, if any were abroad at this hour, would be likely to spot him, and Kwashi had few large carnivores.

The ship was as he had left it. He lifted slowly to fifty thousand meters and then cut in the orbital thrust. That was when he first heard the voice.

*(Hello, Steve.)*

If it hadn't been for the G-forces against him at that moment, Dalt would have leaped out of his chair in surprise.

*(This pressure is quite uncomfortable, isn't it?)* the voice said and Dalt realized that it was coming from inside his head. The thrust automatically cut off as orbit was reached and his stomach gave its familiar free-fall lurch.

*(Ah! This is much better.)*

"What's going on?" Dalt cried aloud as he glanced frantically about. "Is this someone's idea of a joke?"

*(No joke, Steve. I'm what's left of the alaret that landed on your head back in that cave. You're quite lucky, you know. Mutual death is the result—most of the time, at least—when-ever a creature of high-level intelligence is a target for pairing.)*

I'm going crazy! Dalt thought.

*(No, you're not, at least not yet. But it is a possibility if you don't sit back and relax and accept what's happened to you.)*

Dalt leaned back and rested his eyes on the growing metal sphere that was the Star Ways Corporation mother ship on the forward viewer. The glowing signal on the console indicated that the bigger ship had him in traction and was reeling him in.

"O.K., then. Just what has hap-pened to me?" He felt a little ridicu-lous speaking out loud in an empty cabin.

*(Well, to put it in a nutshell: you've got yourself a roommate, Steve. From now on, you and I will be sharing your body.)*

"In other words, I've been in-vaded!"

*(That's a loaded term, Steve, and not quite accurate. I'm not really tak-ing anything from you except some of your privacy and that shouldn't really matter since the two of us will be so intimately associated.)*

"And just what gives you the right to invade my mind?" Dalt asked quickly, then added: "And my pri-vacy?"

*(Nothing gives me the right to do so, but there are extenuating circum-stances. You see, a few hours ago I was a furry, lichen-eating cave slug with no intelligence to speak of—)*

"For a slug you have a pretty good command of the language!" Dalt in-terrupted.

*(No better and no worse than yours, for I derive whatever intelligence I have from you. You see, we alarets, as you call us, invade the nervous system of any creature of sufficient size that comes near enough. It's an instinct with us. If the creature is a dog, then we wind up with the intelligence of a dog—that particular dog. If it's a hu-man and if he survives as you have done, the invading alaret finds himself possessing a very high degree of intel-ligence.)*

"You said 'invade' just then."

*(Just an innocent slip, I assure you. I have no intention of taking over. That would be quite immoral.)*

Dalt laughed grimly. "What would an ex-slug know about morality?"

*(With the aid of your faculties I can reason now, can I not? And if I can reason, why can't I arrive at a moral code? This is your body and I am here only because of blind instinct. I have the ability to take control—not with-out a struggle, of course—but it would be immoral to attempt to do so. I couldn't vacate your mind if I wanted to, so you're stuck with me, Steve. Might as well make the best of it.)*

"We'll see how 'stuck' I am when I get back to the ship," Dalt muttered. "But I'd like to know how you got into my brain."

*(I'm not exactly sure of that myself I know the path I followed to pene-trate your skull—if you had the ana-tomical vocabulary I could describe it to you, but my vocabulary is your vo-cabulary and yours is very limited in that area)*

"What do you expect? I was edu-cated in cultural studies, not medi-cine!"

*(It's not important anyway. I re-member almost nothing of my exis-tence before entering your skull, for it wasn't until then that I first became truly aware.)*

Dalt glanced at the console and straightened up in his seat. "Well, whatever you are, go away for now. I'm ready to dock and I don't want to be distracted."

*(Gladly. You have a most fascinat-ing organism and I have much explor-ing to do before I become fully ac-quainted with it. So long for now, Steve. It's nice knowing you.)*

A thought drifted through Dalt's head. If I'm going nuts, at least I'm not doing it half-heartedly!

Bane was there to meet him at the dock. "No luck, Steve?"

Dalt shook his head and was about to add a comment when he noticed Barre staring at him with a strange expression.

"What's the matter?"

"You won't believe me if I tell you," Barre replied. He took Dalt's arm and led him into a nearby men's room and stood him in front of a mirror.

Dalt saw what he expected to see: a tall, muscular man in the garb of a Kwashi serf. Tanned face, short, glossy black hair . . . Dalt suddenly flexed his neck to get a better look at the top of his head. Tufts of hair were missing in a roughly oval patchon his scalp. He ran his hand over it and a light rain of black hair showered past his eyes. With successive strokes, the oval patch became com-pletely denuded and a

shiny expanse of scalp reflected the ceiling lights into the mirror.

"Well, I'll be damned! A bald spot!"

(*Don't worry, Steve,*) said the voice in his head, (*the roots aren't dead. The hair will grow back.*)

"It damn well better!" Dalt said aloud.

"It damn well better what?" Barre asked puzzledly.

"Nothing," Dalt replied. "Some-thing dropped onto my head in a cave down there and it looks like it's given me a bald spot." He realized then that he would have to be very careful about talking to his invader, otherwise, even if he really wasn't crazy, he'd soon have everyone on the ship believing he was.

"Maybe you'd better see the doc," Barre suggested.

"I intend to, believe me. But first I've got to report to Clarkson. I'm sure he's waiting."

"You can bet on it." Barre had been a research head on the brain project and was well acquainted with Dirval Clarkson's notorious impatience.

The pair walked briskly toward Clarkson's office. The rotation of the huge spherical ship gave the effect of 1-G; movement for all the personnel aboard would have been a major task without the artificial gravity.

"Hi, Jean," Dalt said with a smile as he and Bane entered the ante-room of Clarkson's office. Jean was Clarkson's secretary and she and Dalt had entertained each other on the trip out . . . the more interesting games had been played during the sleep-time hours.

She returned his smile. "Glad you're back in one piece." Dalt realized that from her seated position she couldn't see the bald spot. Just as well for the moment. He'd explain it to her later.

Jean spoke into the intercom. "Mr. Dalt is here."

"Well, send him in!" squawked a voice. "Send him in!"

Dalt grinned and pushed through the door to Clarkson's office with Bane trailing behind. A huge, graying man leaped from behind a desk and stalked forward at a precarious angle.

"Dalt! Where the hell have you been? You were supposed to go down, take a look and then come back up. You could have done the procedure three times in the period you took. And what happened to your head?" Clarkson's speech was in its usual rapid-fire form.

"Well, this—"

"Never mind that now! What's the story? I can tell right now that you didn't find anything because Barre is with you. If you'd found the brain he'd be off in some corner now nursing it like a misplaced infant! Well, tell me! How does it look?"

Dalt hesitated, not quite sure as to whether the barrage had come to an end. "It doesn't look good," he said finally.

"And why not?"

"Because I couldn't find a trace of the ship itself. Oh, there's evidence of some sort of craft having been there a while back, but it must have gotten off-planet again because there's not a trace of wreckage to be found."

Clarkson looked puzzled. "Not even a trace?"

"Nothing."

The project director pondered this a moment, then shrugged. "We'll have to figure that one out later. But right now you should know that we picked up another signal from the brain's life-support system while you were off on your joyride—"

"It wasn't a joyride," Dalt declared. A few moments with Clarkson always managed to rub his nerves raw. "I ran into a pack of unfriendly locals and had to hide in a cave."

"Be that as it may," Clarkson said, returning to his desk chair, "we're now certain that the brain, or what's left of it, is on Kwashi."

"Yes, but where on Kwashi? It's not exactly an asteroid, you know."

"We've almost pinpointed its location," Barre broke in excitedly. "Very close to the site you inspected."

"It's in Bendelema, I hope," Dalt said.

"Why?" Clarkson asked.

"Because when I was on cultural survey down there I posed as a sol-dier of fortune—a mercenary of sorts—and Duke Kile of Bendelema was a former employer. I'm known and liked in Bendelema. I'm not at all popular in Tependia because they're the ones I fought against. I repeat: It's in Bendelema, I hope."

Clarkson nodded. "It's in Ben-delema, all right."

"Good!" Dalt exhaled with relief. "That makes everything much simpler. I've got an identity in Ben-delema: Racso the Mercenary. At least that's a starting place."

"And you'll start tomorrow," Clarkson said. "We've wasted too much time as it is. If we don't get that prototype back and start coming up with some pretty good reasons for the malfunction, Star Ways might just cancel the project. There's a lot riding on you, Dalt. Remember that."

Dalt turned toward the door. "Who'll let me forget?" he remarked with a grim smile. "I'll check in with you before I leave."

"Good enough," Clarkson said with a curt nod, then turned to Barre. "Hold on a minute, Bane. I want to go over a few things with you." Dalt gladly closed the door on the pair.

"It's almost lunch time," said a feminine voice behind him. "How about it?"

In a single motion, Dalt spun, leaned over Jean's desk and gave her a peck on the lips. "Sorry, can't. It may be noon to all of you on ship-time, but it's some hellish hour of the morning to me. I've got to drop in on the doc, then I've just got to get some sleep."

But Jean wasn't listening. Instead, she was staring fixedly at the bald spot on Dalt's head. "Steve!" she cried. "What happened?"

Dalt straightened up abruptly. "Nothing much. Something landed on it while I was below and the hair fell out. It'll grow back, don't worry."

"I'm not worried about that," she said, standing up and trying to get another look. But Dalt kept his head high. "Did it hurt?"

"Not at all. Look, I hate to run off like this, but I've got to get some sleep. I'm going back down tomorrow."

Her face fell. "So soon?"

"I'm afraid so. Why don't we make it for dinner tonight. I'll drop by your room and we'll go from there. The cafeteria isn't exactly a restaurant but if we get there late, we can probably have a table all to our-selves."

"And after that?" she asked coyly.

"I'll be damned if we're going to spend my last night on ship for who--knows-how-long in the vid theater!"

Jean smiled. "I was hoping you'd say that."

*(What odd physiological rumblings that female stirs in you!)* the voice said as Dalt walked down the corridor to the medical offices. He momentarily broke stride at the sound of it. He'd almost forgotten that he had company.

"That's none of your business!" he muttered through tight lips.

*(I'm afraid much of what you do is my business. I'm not directly connected with you emotionally, but physically . . . what you feel, I feel; what you see, I see; what you taste—)*

"O.K. ! O.K.!"

*(You're holding up rather well, actually. Better than I would have expected.)*

"Probably my cultural survey training. They taught me how to keep my reactions under control when faced with an unusual situation."

*(Glad to hear it. We may well have a long relationship ahead of us if you don't go the way of most high-order intelligences and suicidally reject me. We can look on your body as a small business and the two of us as partners.)*

"Partners!" Dalt said, somewhat louder than he wished. Luckily, the halls were deserted. "This is my body!"

*(If it will make you happier, I'll re-vise my analogy: you're the founder of the company and I've*

*just bought my way in. How's that sound, Partner?)*

"Lousy!"

*(Get used to it,)* the voice sing-songed.

"Why bother? You won't be in there long. The doc'll see to that!"

*(He won't find a thing, Steve.)*

"We'll see."

The door to the medical complex swished open when Dalt touched the operating plate and, he passed into a tiny waiting room.

"What can we do for you, Mr. Dalt?" the nurse/receptionist said. Dalt was a well-known figure about the ship by now.

He inclined his head toward the woman and pointed to the bald spot. "I want to see the doc about this. I'm going below tomorrow and I want to get this cleared up before I do. So if the doc's got a moment, I'd like to see him."

The nurse smiled. "Right away." At the moment, Dalt was a very important man. He was the only one aboard ship legally allowed on Kwashi. If he thought he needed a doctor, he'd have one.

A man in the traditional white medical coat poked his head through one of the three doors leading from the waiting room in answer to the nurse's buzz.

"What is it, Lorraine?" he asked. "Mr. Dalt would like to see you, Doctor."

He glanced at Dalt. "Of course. Come in, Mr. Dalt. I'm Dr. Graves." The doctor showed him into a small, book and microfilm-lined office. "Have a seat, will you? I'll be with you in a minute."

Graves exited by another door and Dalt was alone . . . almost.

*(He has quite an extensive library here, doesn't he?)* said the voice. Dalt glanced at the shelves and noticed printed texts that must have been holdovers from the doctor's student days to microfilm spools of the latest clinical developments. *(You would do me a great service by asking the doctor if you could borrow some of his more basic texts.)*

"What for? I thought you knew all about me."

*(I know quite a bit now, it's true, but I'm still learning and I'll need a vocabulary to explain things to you now and then.)*

"Forget it. You're not going to be around that long."

Dr. Graves entered then. "Now. What seems to be the problem, Mr. Dalt?"

Dalt explained the incident in the cave. "Legend has it—and colonial experience seems to confirm it—that of every thousand struck down, nine hundred and ninety-nine will die. I was floored by an alaret but I'm still kicking and I'd like to know why."

*(I believe I've already explained that by luck of a random constitutional factor, your nervous system didn't reject me.)*

Shut up! Dalt mentally snarled.

The doctor shrugged. "I don't see the problem. You're alive and all you've got to show for your encounter is a bald spot, and even that will disappear—it's bristly already. I can't tell you why you're alive because I don't know how these alarets kill their victims. As far as I know, no one's done any research on them. So why don't you just forget about it and stay out of caves."

"It's not that simple, Doc." Dalt spoke carefully. He'd have to phrase things just right; if he came right out and told the truth, he'd sound like a flaming schiz. "I have this feeling that something seeped into my scalp, maybe even into my head. I feel this thickness there." Dalt noticed the slightest narrowing of the doctor's gaze. "I'm not crazy," he said hurriedly. "You've got to admit that the alaret did something up there—the bald spot proves it. Couldn't you make a few tests or something? Just to ease my mind."

The doctor nodded. He was satisfied that Dalt's fears had sufficient basis in reality and the section-eight gleam left his eyes. He led Dalt into the adjoining room and placed a cubical helmet-like apparatus over his head. A click, a buzz and the helmet was removed. Dr. Graves pulled out two small transparencies and shoved them into a viewer. The screen came to life with two views of the inside of Dalt's skull: a lateral and an anterior-posterior.

"Nothing to worry about," he said after a moment of study. "I 'scoped you for your own peace of

mind. Take a look."

Dalt looked, even though he didn't know what he was looking for.

*(I told you so,)* said the voice. *(I'm thoroughly integrated with your nervous system.)*

"Well, thanks for your trouble, Doc. I guess I've really got nothing to worry about," Dalt lied.

"Nothing at all. Just consider yourself lucky to be alive if those alarets are as deadly as you say." *(Ask him for the books!)* the voice said.

I'm going to sleep as soon as I leave here. You won't get a chance to read them, Dalt thought.

*(You let me worry about that. Just get the books for me.)*

Why should I do you any favors? Dalt asked.

*(Because I'll see to it that you have one difficult time of getting to sleep. I'll keep repeating "Get the books, get the books, get the books" until you finally do it.)*

I believe you would!

*(You can count on it.)*

"Doc," Dalt said, "would you mind lending me a few of your books?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, anatomy and physiology to start."

Dr. Graves walked into the other room and took two large, frayed volumes from the shelves. "What do you want 'em for?"

"Nothing much," Dalt said, taking the books and tucking them under his arm. "Just want to look up a few things."

"Well, just don't forget where you got them. And don't let that incident with the alaret become an obsession with you," the doc said meaningfully.

Dalt smiled. "I've already banished it from my mind."

*(That's a laugh!)*

Dalt wasted no time in reaching his quarters after leaving the medical offices. He was on the bed before the door could slide back into the closed position. Putting the medical books on the night table, he buried his face in the pillow and immediately dropped off to sleep.

He awoke five hours later feeling completely refreshed except for his eyes. They felt hot, burning.

*(You may return those books any time you wish,)* the voice said.

"Lost interest already?" Dalt yawned, stretching as he lay on the bed.

*(In a way, yes. I read them while you were asleep.)*

"How the hell did you do that?"

*(Quite simple, really. While your mind was sleeping, I used your eyes and your hands to read. I digested the information and stored it away in your brain. By the way, there's an awful lot of wasted space in the human brain. You're not living up to anywhere near your potential, Steve. Neither is any other member of your race, I gather.)*

"What right have you got to pull something like that with my body?" Dalt said angrily. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

*(Our body, you mean.)*

Dalt ignored that. "No wonder my eyes are burning! I've been reading when I could have been—should have been—sleeping!"

*(Don't get excited. You got your sleep and I built up my vocabulary. You're fully rested so what's your complaint? By the way, I can now tell you how I entered your head. I seeped into your pores and then into your scalp capillaries which I followed into your parietal emissary veins. These flow through the parietal foramina in your skull and empty into the superior sagittal sinus. From there it was easy to infiltrate your central nervous system.)*

Dalt opened his mouth to say that he really didn't care when he realized that he understood exactly what the voice was saying. He had a clear picture of the described path floating through his mind.

"How come I know what you're talking about? I seem to understand but I don't remember ever hearing those terms before . . . and then again, I do. It's weird."

*(It must seem rather odd,)* the voice concurred. *(What has happened is that I've made my new*

knowledge available to you. The result is you experience the fruits of the learning process without having gone through it. You know facts without remembering having learned them.)

"Well," Dalt said, rising to his feet, "at least you're not a complete parasite."

*(I resent that! We're partners ... a symbiosis!)*

"I suppose you may come in handy now and then," Dalt sighed. *(I already have.)*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

*(I found a small neoplasm in your lung—middle lobe on the right. It might well have become malignant.)*

"Then let's get back to the doc before it metastasizes!" Dalt said and idly realized that a few hours ago he would have been worrying about "spread" rather than "metastasis."

*(There's no need to worry, Steve. I killed it off)*

"How'd you do that?"

*(I just worked through your sympathetic nervous system and selectively cut off the blood supply to that particular group of cells.)*

"Well, thanks, Partner."

*(No thanks necessary, I assure you. I did it for my own good as well as yours—I don't relish the idea of walking around in a cancer-ridden body any more than you do!)*

Dalt removed his serf clothing in silence. The enormity of what had happened in that cave on Kwashi struck him now with full force. He had a built-in medical watchdog who would keep everything running smoothly. He smiled grimly as he donned ship clothes and suspended from his neck the glowing prismatic gem that he had first worn as Racso and had continued to wear after his cultural survey assignment on Kwashi had been terminated. He'd have his health but he'd lost his privacy forever. He wondered if it was worth it.

*(One other thing, Steve,) said the voice. (I've accelerated the growth of your hair in the bald spot to maximum.)*

Dalt put up a hand and felt a thick fuzz where before there had been only bare scalp. "Hey! You're right! It's really coming in!" He went to the mirror to take a look. "Oh, no!"

*(Sorry about that, Steve. I couldn't see it so I wasn't aware there had been a color change. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that.)*

Dalt stared in dismay at the patch of silvery gray in the center of his otherwise inky hair. "I look like a freak!"

*(You can always dye it.)*

Dalt made a disgusted noise.

*(I have a few questions, Steve,) the voice said in a hasty attempt to change the subject.*

"What about?"

*(About why you're going down to that planet tomorrow.)*

"I'm going because I was once a member of the Federation cultural survey team on Kwashi and because the Star Ways Corporation lost an experimental pilot brain down there. They got permission from the Federation to retrieve the brain only on the condition that a cultural survey man do the actual retrieving."

*(That's not what I meant. I want to know what's so important about the brain, just how much of a brain it actually is, and so on.)*

"There's an easy way to find out," Dalt said, heading for the door. "We'll just go to the ship's library."

The library was near the hub of the ship and completely computer operated. Dalt closed himself away in one of the tiny viewer booths and pushed his I.D. card into the awaiting slot.

The flat, dull tones of the computer's voice came from a hidden speaker.

"What do you wish, Mr. Dalt?" "I might as well go the route: let me see everything on the brain project."

Four micro spools slid down a tiny chute and landed in the receptacle in front of Dalt. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dalt," said the computer, "but this is all your present status allows."



*(That should be enough, Steve. Feed them into the viewer.)*

The story that unraveled from the spools was one of biological and economic daring. Star Ways was fast achieving what amounted to a monopoly of the interstellar warp unit market and from there was expanding to peristellar drive. But unlike the typical established corporation, Star Ways was pouring money into basic research. One of the prime areas of research was the development of a use for cultured human neural tissue. And James Barre had found a use that held great economic potential.

The prime expense of interstellar commercial travel, whether freight or passenger, was the crew. Good spacers were a select lot and hard to come by; running a ship took a lot of them. There had been many attempts to replace crews with computers, but these had invariably failed due either to mass/volume problems or overwhelming maintenance costs. Barre's development of an "artificial" brain—by that he meant structured in vitro—seemed to hold an answer, at least for cargo ships.

After much trial and error with life-support systems and control linkages, a working prototype had finally been developed. A few short hops had been tried with a full crew standing by and the results had been more than anyone had hoped for. So the prototype was prepared for a long interstellar journey with five scheduled stops—with cargo holds empty, of course. The run had gone quite well until the ship got into the Kwashi area. A single technician had been sent along to insure that nothing went too far awry and, according to his story, he had been sitting in the ship's library when it suddenly came out of warp with the emergency/abandon ship signals blaring. He wasted no time in getting to a lifeboat and ejecting. The ship made a beeline for Kwashi and disappeared, presumably in a crash. That had been eight months ago.

No more information was available without special clearance.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Dalt said.

"Are you addressing me, Mr. Dalt?" the computer asked.

"No."

*(There certainly wasn't much new information there,)* the voice agreed.

Dalt pulled his card from the slot, thereby cutting the computer off from this particular viewer booth, before answering. Otherwise it would keep butting in.

"The theories now stand at either malfunction or foul play."

*(Why foul play?)*

"The spacers' guild, for one," Dalt said, standing. "Competing companies for another. But since it crashed on a restricted splinter world, I favor the malfunction theory." As he stepped from the booth he glanced at the chronometer on the wall: 1900 hours ship-time. Jean would be waiting.

The cafeteria was nearly deserted when he arrived with Jean and the pair found an isolated table in a far corner.

"I really don't think you should dye your hair at all," Jean was saying as they placed their trays on the table and sat down. "I think that gray patch looks cute in a distinguished sort of way . . . or do I mean distinguished in a cute sort of way?"

Dalt took the ribbing in good-natured silence.

"Steve!" she said suddenly. "How come you're eating with your left hand? I've never seen you do that before."

Dalt looked down. His fork was firmly grasped in his left hand. "That's strange," he said. "I didn't even realize it."

*(I integrated a few circuits, so to speak, while you were asleep,)* the voice said. *(It seemed rather ridiculous to favor one limb over another. You're now ambidextrous.)*

Thanks for telling me, Partner!

*(Sorry. I forgot.)*

Dalt switched the fork to his right hand and Jean switched the topic of conversation.

"You know, Steve," she said, "you've never told me why you quit the cultural survey group."

Dalt paused before answering. After the fall of Metep VII, last in a long line of self-styled "Emperors of the Outworlds," a new independent spirit gave rise to a loose organization of worlds called simply

"the Federation."

"As you know," he said finally, "the Federation started the cultural surveys in order to start bringing splinter worlds—willing ones, that is—back into the fold. But it was found that an appalling number had regressed into barbarism. So the cul-tural surveys were started to evaluate splinter worlds and decide which could be trusted with modern tech-nology. There was another rule which I didn't fully appreciate back then but have come to believe in since, and that's where the trouble began."

"What rule was that?"

"It's not put down anywhere in so many words, but it runs to the effect that if any splinter world culture has started developing on a path at vari-ance with the rest of humanity, it is to be left alone."

"Sounds like they were making cultural test tubes out of some plan-ets," Jean said.

"Exactly what I thought, but it never bothered me until I surveyed a planet that must, for now, remain nameless. The inhabitants had been developing a psi culture through se-lective breeding and were actually developing a tangential society. In my report I strongly recommended admission to the Fed; I thought we could learn as much from them as they from us."

"But it was turned down, I bet," Jean concluded.

Dalt nodded. "I had quite a row with my superiors, but they held firm and I stalked out in a rage and quit."

"Maybe they thought you were too easy on the planet"

"They knew better. I had no qualms about proscribing Kwashi, for instance. No, their reason was fear that the psi society was not ma-ture enough to be exposed to galactic civilization, that it would be swal-owed up. They wanted to give it an-other century or two. I thought that was unfair but was powerless to do anything about it."

Jean eyed him with a penetrating gaze. "I notice you've been using the past tense. Change your mind since then?"

"Definitely. I've come to see that there's a very basic, very definite phi-losophy behind everything the Fed-eration does. It not only wants to preserve human diversity, it wants to see it stretched to the limit. Man was an almost completely homogenized species before he began colonizing the stars; interstellar travel arrived just in time. Old Earth is still a good example of what I mean; long ago the Eastern and Western Alliances fused—something no one ever thought would happen—and Earth is just one big faceless, self-perpetu-eating bureaucracy. The populace is qually faceless.

"But the man who left for the stars—he's another creature altogether! Once he got away from the press of other people, once he stopped seeing what everybody else saw, hearing what everybody else heard, he began to become an indi-vidual again and to strike out in di-rections of his own choosing. The splinter groups carried this out to an extreme and many failed. But a few survived and the Federation wants to let the successful ones go as far as they can, both for their own sake and for the sake of all mankind. Who knows? Homo superior may one day be born on a splinter world."

They took their time strolling back to Dales quarters. Once inside, Dalt glanced in the mirror and ran his hand through the gray patch in his hair: "It's still there," he muttered in mock disappointment.

He turned back to Jean and she was already more than half undressed. "You weren't gone all that long, Steve," she said in a low voice, "but I missed you—really missed you."

It was mutual.

She was gone when he awakened the next morning but a little note on the night table wished him good luck.

*(You should have prepared me for such a sensory jolt,)* said the voice. *(I was taken quite by surprise last night.)*

"Oh, it's you again," Dalt groaned.

"I pushed you completely out of my mind last night, otherwise I'd have been impotent, no doubt." *(I hooked into your sensory input—very stimulating.)*

Dalt experienced helpless annoy-ance. He would have to get used to his partner's presence at the most in-timate moments, but how many people could make love knowing there's a peeping torn at the

window with a completely unobstructed view?

*(What are we going to do now?)*

"Pard," Dalt drawled, "we're gonna git ready to go below." He went to the closet and pulled from it a worn leather jerkin and a breast-plate marked with an empty red circle, the mark of the mercenary. Stiff leather breeches followed, and broadsword and metal helm completed the picture. He then dyed his hair for Racso's sake.

"One more thing," he said and reached up to the far end of the closet shelf. His hand returned clutching an ornate dagger. "This is something new in Racso's arma-ment."

*(A dagger?)*

"Not just a dagger. It's—"

*(Oh, yes. It's also a blaster.)*

"How did you know?"

*(We're partners, Steve. What you know, I know. I even know why you had it made.)*

"I'm listening."

*(Because you're afraid you're not as fast as you used to be. You think your muscles may not have quite the tone they used to have when you first posed as Racso. And you're not willing to die looking for an artificial brain.)*

"Looks like I'll never have a secret again," Dalt sighed.

*(Not from me, at least.)*

Dalt planned the time of his ar-rival in Bendelema Duchy for predawn. He concealed the shuttlecraft and was on the road toward the keep as the sky began to lighten. As he walked along in silence, a light saddle slung over his shoulder, he marveled at the full ripe fields of grains and greens to either side of him. Agriculture had always been a hit or miss affair on Kwashi and famines were not uncommon, but it looked as if there would be no fam-ine in Bendelema this year. Even the serfs, already hard at work in the fields, looked well fed.

"What do you think, Pard?" Dalt asked.

*(Well, Kwashi hasn't got much of a tilt on its axis. They could be on their way to the second bumper crop of the year.)*

"With the available farming meth-ods, two consecutive bumper crops are unheard of on Kwashi. I almost starved here once myself."

*(I know that, but I have no ex-planation for these plump serfs.)*

The road made a turn around a small wooded area and the Bendelema keep came into view.

"I see their architecture hasn't im-proved since I left. The keep still looks like a pile of rocks."

*(I've been wondering, Steve,) Pard said as they approached the stone structure, (why is it that so many ret-rograde splinter worlds turn to feudal-ism?)*

"Nobody really knows, but the reason could be that feudalism is in essence the law of the jungle. When these colonies first land, education of the children usually takes a back seat to putting food on the table. That's their first mistake and a tragic one, because once they let technology slide, they're on a downhill spiral. Usually by the third generation you have a pretty low technological level; the stops are out, the equal-izers are gone and the toughs take over.

"The philosophy of feudalism is one of muscle: mine is what I can take and hold. It's ordered barbar-ism. That's why feudal worlds such as Kwashi have to be kept out of the Federation—can you imagine a bunch of these yahoos in command of an interstellar dreadnaught? No one's got the time or the money to reeducate them so they just have to be left alone to work out their own little industrial revolution and so forth. When they're ready, the Fedwill give them the option of joining up."

"Ho, Mercenary!" someone hailed from .the keep gate. "What do you seek in Bendelema?"

"Have I changed that much, Farri?" Dalt answered.

The guard peered at him intensely from the wall, then his face bright-ened. "Racso! Enter and be wel-come! The Duke has need of men of your mettle."

Farri, a swarthy trooper who had gained a few pounds and a few scars since their last meeting, greeted him as he passed through the open gate. "Where's your mount, Racso?" he grinned. "You were never one to walk when you could ride."

"Broke its leg in a ditch more miles back than I care to remember. Had to kill it . . . good steed, too."

"That's a shame. But the Duke'll see that you get a new one."

Dalt's audience with the Duke was disturbingly brief. The lord of the keep had not been as enthusiastic as expected. Dalt couldn't decide whether to put the man's reticence down to distraction with other mat-ters or suspicion. His son Anthon was a different matter, however. He was truly glad to see Racso.

"Come," he said after mutual greetings were over. "We'll put you in the room next to mine upstairs."

"For a mercenary?"

"For my teacher!" Anthon had filled out since Dalt had seen him last. He had spent many hours with the lad passing on the tricks of the blade he had learned in his own training days. "I've used your train-ing well, Racso!"

"I hope you didn't stop learning when I left," Dalt said.

"Come down to the sparring field and you'll see that I've not been lax in your absence. I'm a match for you now."

He was more than a match. What he lacked in skill and subtlety he made up for with sheer ferocity. Dalt was several times hard pressed to de-fend himself, but in the general stroke-and-parry, give-and-take ex-ercises of the practice session he studied Anthon. The lad was still the same as he had remembered him on the surface: bold, confident, the Duke's only legitimate son and heir to Bendelema, yet there was a new undercurrent. Anthon had always been brutish and a trifle cruel, per-fect qualities for a future feudal lord, but there was now an added note of desperation. Dalt hadn't noticed it before and could think of no reason for its presence now. Anthon's posi-tion was secure—what was driving him?

After the workout, Dalt immersed himself in a huge tub of hot water, a habit that had earned him the repu-tation of being a little bit odd the last time around, and then retired to his quarters where he promptly fell asleep. The morning's long walk car-rying the saddle followed by the vig-orous swordplay with Anthon had drained him.

He awoke feeling stiff and sore. (*I hope those aching muscles cause you sufficient misery.*)

"Why do you say that, Pard?" Dalt asked as he kneaded the muscles in his sword arm.

(*Because you weren't ready for a workout like that. The clumsy prac-ticing you did on the ship didn't pre-pare you for someone like Anthon. It's all right if you want to make yourself sore, but don't forget I feel it, too!*)

"Well, just cut off pain sensations. You can do it, can't you?"

(*Yes, but that's almost as unpleas-ant as the aching itself*)

"You'll just have to suffer along with me then. And by the way, you're quiet today. What's up?"

(*I've been observing, comparing your past impressions of Bendelema keep with what we see now. Either you're a rotten observer or some-thing's going on here . . . something suspicious or something secret or I don't know what.*)

"What do you mean by 'rotten ob-server'?"

(*I mean that either your past obser-vations were inaccurate or Bendelema has changed*)

"In what way?"

(*I'm not quite sure as yet but I should know before long. I'm a far more astute observer than you—*)

Dalt threw his hands up with a groan. "Not only do I have a live-in busybody, but an arrogant one to boot!"

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Dalt said.

The door opened and Anthon en-tered. He glanced about the room. "You're alone? I thought I heard

you talking—"

"A bad habit of mine of late," Dalt explained hastily. "I think out loud."

Anthon shrugged. "The evening meal will soon be served and I've ordered that a place be set for you at my father's table. Come."

As he followed the younger man down a narrow flight of roughhewn steps, Dalt caught the heavy, unmis-takable scent of Kwashi wine.

A tall, cadaverous man inclined his head as they passed into the dining hall. "Hello, Strench," Dalt said with a smile. "Still the majordomo, I see."

"As long as His Lordship allows," Strench replied.

The Duke himself entered not far behind them and all present remained standing until His Lordship was seated. Dalt found himself near the head of the table and guessed by the ruffled appearance of a few of the court advisers that they had been pushed a little farther from the seat of power than they liked.

"I must thank His Lordship for the honor of allowing a mercenary to sup at his table," Dalt said after a court official had made the customary toast to Bendelema and the Duke's longevity.

"Nonsense, Racso," the Duke replied. "You served me well against Tependia and you've always taken a wholesome interest in my son. You know you will always find welcome in Bendelema."

Dalt inclined his head.

*(Why are you bowing and scraping to this slob?)*

Shut up, Pard! It's all part of the act, Dalt told him.

*(But don't you realize how many serfs this barbarian oppresses?)*

Shut up, self-righteous parasite!

*(Symbiote!)*

Dalt rose to his feet and lifted his wine cup. "On the subject of your son, I would like to make a toast to the future Duke of Bendelema: An-thon."

With a sudden animal-like cry, Anthon shot to his feet and hurled his cup to the stone floor. Without a word of explanation, he stormed from the room.

The other diners were as puzzled as Dalt. "Perhaps I said the wrong thing . . ."

"I don't know what it could have been," the Duke said, his eyes on the red splotch of spilled wine that seeped across the stones. "But An-thon has been acting rather strange of late."

Dalt sat down and raised his cup to his lips.

*(I wouldn't quaff too deeply of that beverage, my sharp-tongued partner.)*

And why not? Dalt thought, casually resting his lips on the brim.

*(Because I think there's something in your wine that's not in any of the others' and I think we should be care-ful.)*

What makes you suspicious?

*(I told you your powers of observation needed sharpening.)*

Never mind that! Explain!

*(All right. I noticed that your cup was already filled when it was put before you; everyone else's was poured from that brass pitcher.)*

That doesn't sound good, Dalt agreed. He started to put the cup down.

*(Don't do that! Just wet your lips with a tiny amount and I think I might be able to analyze it by its effect. A small amount shouldn't cause any real harm.)*

Dalt did so and waited.

*(Well, at least they don't mean you any serious harm,)* Pard said finally. *(Not yet.)*

What is it?

*(An alkaloid, probably from some local root.)*

What's it suppose to do to me?

*(Put you out of the picture for the rest of the night.)*

Dalt pondered this. I wonder what for?

*(I haven't the faintest. But while they're all still distracted by Anthon's departure, I suggest you pour your wine out on the floor immediately. It will mix with Anthon's and no one will be the*

*wiser. You may then proceed to amaze these yokels with your continuing consciousness.)*

I have a better idea, Dalt thought as he poured the wine along the out-side of his boot so that it would strike the floor in a smooth silent flow instead of a noisy splash. I'll wait a few minutes and then pass out.

Maybe that way we'll find out what they've got in mind.

*(Sounds risky.)*

Nevertheless, that's what we'll do.

Dalt decided to make the most of the time he had left before passing out. "You know," he said, feigning a deep swallow of wine, "I saw a bright light streak across the sky last night. It fell to earth far beyond the horizon. I've heard tales lately of such a light coming to rest in this re-gion; some even say it landed in Bendelema itself. Is this true or merely the mutterings of vassals in their cups?"

The table chatter ceased abruptly. So did all eating and drinking. Every face at the table stared in Dalt's di-rection.

"Why do you ask this, Racso?" the Duke said. The curtain of suspicion which had seemed to vanish at the beginning of the meal had again been drawn closed between Racso and the Duke.

Dalt decided it was time for his exit. "My only interest, Your Lordship, is in the idle tales I've heard. I . . ." He half rose from his seat and put a hand across his eyes. "I . . ." Carefully, he allowed him-self to slide to the floor.

"Carry him upstairs," said the Duke.

"Why don't we put an end to his meddling now, Your Lordship," sug-gested one of the advisers.

"Because he's a friend of Anthon's and he may well mean us no harm. We will know tomorrow."

With little delicacy and even less regard for his physical well-being, Dalt was carried up to his room and unceremoniously dumped on the bed. The heavy sound of the hard-wood door slamming shut was fol-lowed by the click of a key in the lock.

Dalt sprang up and checked the door. The key had been taken from the inside and left in the lock after being turned.

*(So much for that bright idea,)* Pard commented caustically.

"None of your remarks, if you please,"

*(What do we do, now that we're confined to quarters for the rest of the night?)*

"What else?" Dalt said. He kicked off his boots, removed breastplate, jerkin and breeches and hopped into bed.

The door was unlocked the next morning and Dalt made his way downstairs as unobtrusively as pos-sible. Strench's cell-like quarters were just off the kitchen if memory served . . . yes, there it was. And Strench was nowhere about.

*(What do you think you're doing?)*

I'm doing my best to make sure we don't get stuck up there in that room again tonight, Dalt informed him. His gaze came to rest on the large board where Strench kept all the du-plicate keys for the locks of the keep.

*(I begin to understand.)*

Slow this morning, aren't you? Dalt took the duplicate key to his room off its hook and replaced it with another similar key from another part of the board. Strench might realize at some time during the day that a key was missing but he'd be looking for the wrong one.

Dalt ran into the majordomo mo-ments later.

"His Lordship wishes to see you, Racso," he said stiffly.

"Where is he?"

"On the North Wall."

*(This could be a critical moment.)*

"Why do you say that, Pard?" Dalt muttered.

*(Remember last night, after you pulled your dramatic collapsing act? The Duke said something about find-ing out about you today.)*

"And you think this could be it?"

*(Could be. I'm not sure, of course, but I'm glad you have that dagger in your belt.)*

The Duke was alone on the wall and greeted Dalt/Racso as warmly as his aloof manner would permit after the latter apologized for "drink-ing too much" the night before.

"I'm afraid I have a small con-fession to make," the Duke said.

"Yes, Your Lordship?"

"I suspected you of treachery when you first arrived." He held up a gloved hand as Dalt opened his mouth to reply. "Don't protest your innocence. I've just heard from a spy in the Tependian court and he says you have not set foot in Tependia since your mysterious disappearance years ago."

Dalt hung his head. "I am grieved, M'lord."

"Can you blame me, Racso? Ev-eryone knows that you hire out to the, highest bidder and Tependia has taken an inordinate interest in what goes on in Bendelema lately, even to the extent of sending raiding parties into our territory to carry off some of my vassals."

"Why would they want to do that?"

The Duke puffed up with pride. "Because Bendelema has become a land of plenty. As you know, the last harvest was plentiful everywhere; and, as usual, the present crop is stunted everywhere . . . except in Bendelema." Dalt didn't know that but he nodded anyway. So only Bendelema was having a second bumper crop—that was interesting.

"I suppose you have learned some new farming methods and Tependia wants to steal them," Dalt suggested.

"That and more," the Duke nod-ded. "We also have new storage methods and new planting methods. When the next famine comes, we shall overcome Tependia not with swords and firebrands, but with food! The starving Tependians will leave their lord and Bendelema will extend its boundaries!"

Dalt was tempted to say that if the Tependians were snatching up vas-sals and stealing Bendelema's se-crets, there just might not be another famine. But the Duke was dreaming of empire and it is not always wise for a mere mercenary to interrupt a duke's dreams of empire. Dalt re-mained silent as the Duke stared at the horizon he soon hoped to own. The rest of the day was spent in idle search of rumors and by the din-ner hour Dalt was sure of one thing: the ship had crashed or landed in the clearing he had inspected a few days before. More than that was known but the Bendeleman locals were keeping it to themselves—yes, I saw the light come down; no, I saw noth-ing else.

Anthon again offered him a seat at the head table and Dalt accepted. When the Duke was toasted, Dalt took only a tiny sip.

What's the verdict, Pard?

*(Same as last night.)*

I wonder what this is all about? They don't drug me at lunch or break-fast—why only at dinner?

*(Tonight we'll try to find out.)*

Since there was no outburst from Anthon this time, Dalt was hard put to find a way to get rid of his drugged wine. He finally decided to feign a collapse again and spill his cup in the process, hoping to hide the fact that he had taken only a few drops.

After slumping forward on the table, he listened intently.

"How long is this to go on, Father? How can we drug him every night without arousing his suspicions?" It was Anthon's voice.

"As long as you insist on quarter-ing him here instead of with the other men at arms!" the Duke re-plied angrily. "We cannot have him wandering about during the nightly services. He's an outsider and must not learn of the godling!"

Anthon's voice was sulky. "Very well . . . I'll have him moved out to the barracks tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Anthon," the Duke said in a milder tone. "I know he's a friend of yours but the godling must come before a mercenary."

*(I have a pretty good idea of the na-ture of this godling,)* Pard said as Dalt/Racso was carried upstairs.

The brain? I was thinking that, too. But how would the brain communi-cate with these people? The

prototype wasn't set up for it.

*(Why do you drag in communication? Isn't it enough that it came from heaven?)*

No. The brain doesn't look godlike in the least. It would have to communicate with the locals before they'd deify it. Otherwise the crash of the ship would be just another fireside tale for the children.

In a rerun of the previous night's events, Dalt was dumped on his bed and the door was locked from the outside. He waited a few long minutes until everything was silent beyond the door, then he poked the duplicate key into the lock. The original was pushed out on the other side and landed on the stone floor with a nightmarishly loud clang. But no other sounds followed so Dalt twisted his own key and slinked down the hall to the stairway that overlooked the dining area.

Empty. The plates hadn't even been cleared away.

"Now where'd everybody go?" Dalt muttered.

*(Quiet! Hear those voices?)*

Dalt moved down the stairs, listening. A muted chanting seemed to fill the chamber. A narrow door stood open to his left and the chanting grew louder as he approached it.

This is it . . . they must have gone through here.

The passage within, hewn from earth and rock, led downward and Dalt followed it. Widely-spaced torches sputtered flickering light against the rough walls and the chanting grew louder as he moved.

Can you make out what they're saying?

*(Something about the sacred objects, half of which must be placed in communion with the sun one day and the other half placed in communion with the sun the next day . . . a continuous cycle.)*

The chant suddenly ended.

*(It appears the litany is over. We had better go back.)*

No, we're hiding right here. The brain is no doubt in there and I want to get back to civilization as soon as possible.

Dalt crouched in a shadowed sulcus in the wall and watched as the procession passed, the Duke in the lead carrying some cloth-covered objects held out before him, Anthon sullenly following. The court advisers plucked the torches from the walls as they moved, but Dalt noticed that light still bled from the unexplored end of the passage. He sidled along the wall toward it after the others had passed.

He was totally unprepared for the sight that greeted his eyes as he entered the terminal alcove.

It was surreal. The vaulted subterranean chamber was strewn with the wreckage of the lost cargo ship. Huge pieces of twisted metal lay stacked against the walls, smaller pieces hung suspended from the ceiling. And foremost and center, nearly indistinguishable from the other junk, sat the silvery life-support apparatus of the brain, as high as a man and twice as broad.

And atop that—the brain, a ball of neural tissue floating in a nutrient bath within a crystalline globe.

*(You can't hear him, can you?)* Pard said.

"Him? Him who?"

*(The brain—it pictures itself as a him—did manage to communicate with the locals. You were right about that.)*

"What are you talking about?"

*(It's telepathic, Steve, and my presence in your brain seems to have blocked your reception. I sensed a few impulses back in the passage but I wasn't sure until it greeted us.)*

"What's it saying?"

*(The obvious: it wants to know who we are and what we want.)* There was a short pause. *(Oh, oh! I just told it that we're here to take it back to Star Ways and it let out a telepathic emergency call—a loud one. Don't be surprised if we have company in a few minutes.)*

"Great! Now what do we do?" Dalt fingered the dagger in his belt as he pondered the situation. It was already too late to run and he didn't want to have to blast his way out. His eyes rested on the globe.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Pard, but I seem to remember something about the globe being removable."

*(Yes, it can be separated from the life-support system for about two hours with no serious*



*harm to the brain.)*

"That's just about all we'd need to get it back to the mother ship and hooked up to another unit."

*(He's quite afraid, Steve,)* Pard said as Dalt began to disconnect the globe. (By the way, I've figured out that little litany we just heard: the sacred objects that are daily put in 'com-munion with the sun' are solar batteries. Half are charged one day, half the next. That's how he keeps himself going.)

Dalt had just finished stoppering the globe's exchange ports when the Duke and his retinue arrived in a noisy, disorganized clatter.

"Racso!" the Duke cried on sight of him. "So you've betrayed us after all!"

"I'm sorry," Dalt said, "but this belongs to someone else."

Anthon lunged to the front. "Traacherous scum! And I called you friend!" As the youth's hand reached for his sword hilt, Dalt raised the globe.

"Stay your hand, Anthon! If any of you try to bar my way, I'll smash this globe and your godling with it!" The Duke blanched and laid a re-straining hand on his son's shoulder. "I didn't come here with the idea of stealing something from you but steal it I must. I regret the necessity." Dalt wasn't lying. He felt, justifiably, that he had betrayed a trust and it didn't sit well with him but he kept reminding himself that the brain belonged to Star Ways and he was only returning it to them.

*(I hope your threat holds them,)* Pard said. *(If they consider the possibilities they'll realize that if they jump you, they'll lose their godling; but if they let you go, they lose it anyway.)*

At that moment, Anthon voiced this same conclusion but still his father restrained him. "Let him take the godling, my son. It has aided us with its wisdom, the least we can do is guarantee it safe passage."

Dalt grabbed one of the retainers. "You run ahead and ready me a horse—a good one!" He watched him go, then slowly followed the passage back to the dining area. The Duke and his group remained behind in the alcove.

"I wonder what kind of plot they're hatching against me now?" Dalt whispered. "Imagine! All the time I spent here never guessing they were telepaths!"

*(They're not, Steve.)*

"Then how do they communicate with this thing?" he said, glancing at the globe under his arm.

*(The brain is an exceptionally strong sender and receiver, that's the secret. These folk are no more telepathic than anyone else.)*

Dalt was relieved to find the horse waiting and the gate open. The larger of Kwashi's two moons was well above the horizon and Dalt took the most direct route to his hidden shuttlecraft.

*(Just a minute, Steve,)* Pard said as Dalt dismounted near the ship's hiding place. *(We seem to have a moral dilemma on our hands.)*

"What's that?" Pard had been silent during the entire trip.

*(I've been talking to the brain and I think it's become a little more than just a piloting device.)*

"Possibly. It crashed, discovered it was telepathic and tried to make the best of the situation. We're returning it. What's the dilemma?"

*(It didn't crash. It sounded the alarm to get rid of the technician and brought the ship down on purpose. And it doesn't want to go back.)*

"Well, it hasn't got much choice in the matter. It was made by Star Ways and that's where it's going."

*(Steve, it's pleading with us!)*

"Pleading?"

*(Yes. Look, you're still thinking of this thing as a bunch of neurons put together to pilot a ship, but it's developed into something more than that. It's now a being, and a thinking, reasoning, volitional one at that! It's no longer a biomechanism, it's an intelligent creature!)*

"So you're a philosopher now, is that it?"

*(Tell me, Steve. What's Barre going to do when he gets his hands on it?)* Dalt didn't want to

answer that. *(He's no doubt going to dissect it, isn't he?)*

"He might not . . . not after he learns it's intelligent."

*(Then let's suppose Barre doesn't dissect him—I mean it . . . no, I mean him. Never mind. If Barre allows it to live, the rest of its life will be spent as an experimental subject. Is that right? Are we justified in delivering it up for that?)*

Dalt didn't answer.

*(It's not causing any harm. As a matter of fact, it may well help put Kwashi on a quicker road back to civilization. It wants no power. It memo-rized the ship's library before it crashed and it was extremely happy down there in that alcove doling out information about fertilizer and crop rotation and so forth and having its batteries charged everyday.)*

"I'm touched," Dalt muttered sar-castically.

*(Joke if you will, but I don't take this lightly.)*

"Do you have to be so self-right-eous?"

*(I'll say no more. You can leave the globe here and the brain will be able to telepathically contact the keep and they'll come out and get it.)*

"And what do I tell Clarkson?"

*(Simply tell him the truth up to the final act and then say that the globe was smashed at the keep when they tried to jump you and you barely es-caped with your life.)*

"That may kill the brain project, you know. Retrieval of the brain is vital to its continuance."

*(That may be so, but it's a risk we'll have to take. If, however, your report states that the brain we were after had developed a consciousness and self-preservation tendencies, a lot of aca-demic interest will surely be generated and research will go on, one way or the other.)*

Much to his dismay, Dalt found himself agreeing with Pard, teetering on the brink of gently placing the globe in the grass and walking away, saying to hell with Star Ways.

*(It's still pleading with us, Steve. Like a child.)*

"All right, dammit!"

Cursing himself for a sucker and a softy, Dalt walked a safe distance from the shuttlecraft and put the globe down.

"But there's a few things we've got to do before we leave here."

*(Like what?)*

"Like filling in our little friend here on some of the basics of feudal culture, something that I'm sure was not contained in his ship's library."

*(He'll learn from experience.)*

"That's what I'm afraid of. With-out a clear understanding of Kwashi's feudal structure, his aid to Bendelema might well unbalance the whole social structure. An overly prosperous duchy is either overcome by jealous, greedy neighbors, or it uses its prosperity to build an army and pursue a plan of conquest. Ei-ther course could prove fatal to the brain and further hinder Kwashi's chances for social and technological rehabilitation."

*(So what's your plan?)*

"A simple one: you'll take all I know about Kwashi and feudalism and feed it to the brain. And you can stress the necessity of finding a means for wider dissemination of its knowledge, such as telepathically dropping bits of information into the heads of passing merchants, min-strels and vagabonds. If this prosper-ity can be spread out over a wide area, there'll be less chance of social upheaval. All of Kwashi will benefit in the long run."

Pard complied and began the feeding process. The brain had a voracious appetite for information and the process was soon completed. As Dalt rose to his feet, he heard a rustling in the bushes. Looking up he saw Anthon striding toward him with a bared sword:

"I've decided to return the godling to Bendelema," Dalt stammered lamely.

Anthon stopped. "I don't want the filthy thing! As a matter of fact, I intend to smash it as soon as I finish with you!" There was a look of incredible hatred in his eyes, the look of a young man who has discovered that his friend and admired instructor is a treacherous thief.

"But the godling has seen to it that no one in Bendelema will ever again go hungry!" Dalt said. "Why destroy it?"

"Because it has also seen to it that no one in the court of Bendelema will ever look up to me as Duke!"

"They look up to your father. Why not you in your turn?"

"They look up to my father out of habit!" he snarled. "But it is the godling who is the source of authority in Bendelema! And when my father is gone, I shall be nothing but a pup-pet."

Dalt now understood Anthon's moodiness: the brain threatened his position.

"So you followed me not in spite of my threat to smash the godling but because of it!"

Anthon nodded and began advancing again. "I also had a score to settle with you, Racso! I couldn't allow you to betray my trust and the trust of my father and go unpunished!" With the last word he aimed a vicious chop at Dalt, who ducked, spun and dodged out of the way. He had not been wearing his sword when he left his room back at the keep and consequently did not have it with him now. But he had the dagger.

Anthon laughed at the sight of the tiny blade. "Think you can stop me with that?"

If you only knew! Dalt thought. He didn't want to use the blaster, however. He understood Anthon's feelings. If there were only some way he could stun him and make his escape.

Anthon attacked ferociously now and Dalt was forced to backpeddle. His foot caught on a stone and as he fell he instinctively threw his free hand out for balance. The ensuing events seemed to occur in slow motion. He felt a jarring, crushing, cutting, agonizing pain in his left wrist and saw Anthon's blade bite through it. The hand flew off as if with a life of its own and a pulsing stream of red shot into the air. Dalt's right hand, too, seemed to take on a life of its own as it reversed the dagger, pointed the butt of the hilt at Anthon and pressed the hidden stud. An energy bolt, blinding in the darkness, struck him in the chest and he went down without a sound.

Dalt grabbed his forearm. "My hand!" he screamed in agony and horror.

*(Give me control!)* Pard said urgently.

"My hand!" was all Dalt could say.

*(GIVE ME CONTROL!)*

Dalt was jolted by this, relaxed for a second and suddenly found himself an observer in his own body. His right hand dropped the dagger and cupped itself firmly over the bleeding stump, the thumb and fingers dug into the flesh of his forearm, searching for pressure points on the arteries.

His legs straightened as he rose to his feet and calmly walked toward the concealed shuttlecraft. His elbows parted the bushes and jabbed the plate that operates the door to the outer lock.

*(I'm glad you didn't lock this up yesterday,)* Pard said as the port swung open. There was a first-aid emergency kit inside for situations such as this. The pinky of his right hand was spared from its pressure duty to flip open the lid of the kit and then a container of stat-gel. The right hand suddenly released its grasp and, amidst a spatter of blood, the stump of his left arm was forcefully shoved into the gel and held there.

*(That should stop the bleeding.)* The gel had an immediate clotting effect on any blood that came into contact with it. The thrombus formed was firm and tough, thereby greatly reducing the threat of embolism.

Rising, Dalt discovered that his body was his own again. He stumbled outside, weak and disoriented.

"You saved my life, Pard," he mumbled finally. "When I looked at that stump with the blood shooting out, I couldn't move."

*(I saved our life, Steve.)*

He walked over to where Anthon lay with a smoking hole where his chest had been. "I wished to avoid that. It wasn't really fair, you know. He only had a sword . . ." Dalt was not quite himself yet. The events of the last minute had not yet been fully absorbed.

*(Fair, hell! What does 'fair' mean when someone's trying to kill you?)*

But Dalt didn't seem to hear. He began searching the ground. "My hand! Where's my hand? If we

bring it back maybe they can replace it!"

*(Not a chance, Steve. Necrosis will be in full swing by the time we get to the mother ship.)*

Dalt sat down. The situation was finally sinking in. "Oh, well," he said resignedly. "They're doing wonderful things with prosthetics these days."

*(Prosthetics! We'll grow a new one!)*

Dalt paused before answering. "A new hand?"

*(Of course! You've still got deposits of omnipotential mesenchymal cells here and there in your body. I'll just have them transported to the area and with me guiding the process there'll be no problem to rebuilding the hand. It's really too bad you humans have no conscious control over the physiology of your bodies. With the proper direction, the human body is capable of almost anything.)*

"You mean I'll have my hand back? Good as new?"

*(Good as new. But at the moment I suggest we get into the ship and de-part. The brain has called the Duke and it might be a good thing if we weren't here when he arrived.)*

"You know," Dalt said as he entered the shuttlecraft and let the port swing to a close behind him, "with you watching over my body, I could live to a ripe old age."

*(All I have to do is keep up with the degenerative changes and you'll live forever.)*

Dalt stopped in midstride. "For-ever?"

*(Of course. The old natives of this planet knew it when they made that warning for their children: "Of every thousand struck down, nine hundred and ninety-nine will die." The obvious conclusion is that the thousandth vic-tim will not die.)*

"Ever?"

*(Well, there's not much I can do if you catch an energy bolt in the chest like Anthon back there. But other-wise, you won't die of old age—I'll see to that. You won't even get old, for that matter.)*

The immensity of what Pard was saying suddenly struck Dalt with full force.

"In other words," he breathed, "I'm immortal."

*(I'd prefer a different pronoun: We are immortal.)*

"I don't believe it."

*(I don't care what you believe. I'm going to keep you alive for a long, long time, Steve, because while you live, I live, and I've grown very fond of living.)*

Dalt did not move, did not make a reply.

*(Well, what are you waiting for? There's a whole galaxy of worlds out there just waiting to be seen and experienced and I'm getting damn sick of this one!)*

Dalt smiled. "What's the hurry?"

There was a pause, then: *(You've got a point there, Steve. There's really no hurry at all. We've got all the time in the world. Literally.)*