

## THE MONSTER

by A. E. van Vogt

The great ship was poised a quarter of a mile above one of the cities. Below was a cosmic desolation. As he floated down in his energy bubble, Enash saw that the buildings were crumbling with age.

‘No sign of war damage!’ The bodiless voice touched his ears momentarily. Enash tuned it out.

On the ground he collapsed his bubble. He found himself in a walled enclosure overgrown with weeds. Several skeletons lay in the tall grass beside the rakish building. They were of long, two-legged, two-armed beings with the skulls in each case mounted at the end of a thin spine. The skeletons, all of adults, seemed in excellent preservation, but when he bent down and touched one, a whole section of it crumpled into a fine powder. As he straightened, he saw that Yoal was floating down nearby. Enash waited till the historian had stepped out of his bubble, then he said:

‘Do you think we ought to use our method of reviving the long dead?’

Yoal was thoughtful. ‘I have been asking questions of the various people who have landed, and there is something wrong here. This planet has no surviving life, not even insect life. We’ll have to find out what happened before we risk any colonization.’

Enash said nothing. A soft wind was blowing. It rustled through a clump of trees nearby. He motioned towards the trees. Yoal nodded and said:

‘Yes, the plant life has not been harmed, but plants after all are not affected in the same way as the active life forms.’

There was an interruption. A voice spoke from Yoal’s re-

ceiver: ‘A museum has been found at approximately the center of the city. A red light has been fixed to the roof.’

Enash said: ‘I’ll go with you, Yoal. There might be skeletons of animals and of the intelligent being in various stages of his evolution. You didn’t answer my question: Are you going to revive these beings?’

Yoal said slowly: ‘I intend to discuss the matter with the council, but I think there is no doubt. We must know the cause of this disaster.’ He waved one sucker vaguely to take in half the compass. He added as an afterthought, ‘We shall proceed cautiously, of course, beginning with an obviously early development. The absence of the skeletons of children indicates that the race had developed personal immortality.’

The council came to look at the exhibits. It was, Enash knew, a formal preliminary only. The decision was made. There would

be revivals. It was more than that. They were curious. Space was vast, the journeys through it long and lonely, landing always a stimulating experience, with its prospect of new life forms to be seen and studied.

The museum looked ordinary. High-domed ceilings, vast rooms. Plastic models of strange beasts, many artifacts – too many to see and comprehend in so short a time. The life span of a race was imprisoned here in a progressive array of relics. Enash looked with the others, and was glad when they came to the line- of skeletons and preserved bodies. He seated himself behind the energy screen, and watched the biological experts take a preserved body out of a stone sarcophagus. It was wrapped in windings of cloth, many of them. The experts did not bother to unravel the rotted material. Their forceps reached through, pinched a piece of the skull – that was the accepted procedure. Any part of the skeleton could be used, but the most perfect revivals, the most complete reconstructions resulted when a certain section of the skull was used.

Hamar, the chief biologist, explained the choice of body. ‘The chemicals used to preserve this mummy show a sketchy knowledge of chemistry; the carvings on the sarcophagus indicate a crude and unmechanical culture. In such a civilization there would not be much development of the potentialities of the nervous system. Our speech experts have been analyzing

the recorded voice mechanism which is a part of each exhibit, and though many languages are involved – evidence that the ancient language spoken at the time the body was alive has been reproduced – they found no difficulty in translating the meanings. They have now adapted our universal speech machine, so that anyone who wishes to, need merely speak into his communicator, and so will have his words translated into the language of the revived person. The reverse, naturally, is also true. Ah, I see we are ready for the first body.’

Enash watched intently with the others, as the lid was clamped down on the plastic reconstructor, and the growth processes were started. He could feel himself becoming tense. For there was nothing haphazard about what was happening. In a few minutes a full-grown ancient inhabitant of this planet would sit up and stare at them. The science involved was simple and always fully effective.

Out of the shadows of smallness life grows. The level of beginning and ending, of life and – not life; in that dim region matter oscillates easily between old and new habits. The habit of organic, or the habit of inorganic.

Electrons do not have life and un-life values. Atoms know nothing of inanimateness. But when atoms form into molecules, there is a step in the process, one tiny step, that is of life –if life begins at all. One step, and then darkness. Or aliveness.

A stone or a living cell. A grain of gold or a blade of grass, the sands of the sea or the equally numerous animalcules inhabiting the endless fishy waters – the difference is there in the twilight zone of matter. Each living cell has in it the whole form. The crab grows a new leg when the old one is torn from its flesh. Both ends of the planarian worm elongate, and soon there are two worms, two identities, two digestive systems, each as greedy as the original, each a whole, unwounded, unharmed by its experience.

Each cell can be the whole. Each cell remembers in a detail so intricate that no totality of words could ever describe the completeness achieved.

But – paradox – memory is not organic. An ordinary wax record remembers sounds. A wire recorder easily gives up a duplicate of the voice that spoke into it years before. Memory

is a physiological impression, a mark on matter, a change in the shape of a molecule, so that when a reaction is desired the *shape* emits the same rhythm of response.

Out of the mummy's skull had come the multi-quadrillion memory shapes from which a response was now being evoked. As ever, the memory held true.

Aman blinked, and opened his eyes.

'It is true, then,' he said aloud, and the words were translated into the Ganae tongue as he spoke them. 'Death is merely an opening into another life – but where are my attendants?' At the end, his voice took on a complaining tone.

He sat up, and climbed out of the case, which had automatically opened as he came to life. He saw his captors. He froze – but only for a moment. He had a pride and a very special arrogant courage which served him now.

Reluctantly, he sank to his knees, and made obeisance, but doubt must have been strong in him. 'Am I in the presence of the gods of Egyptus?'

He climbed to his feet. 'What nonsense is this? I do not bow to nameless demons.'

Captain Gorsid said: 'Kill him!'

The two-legged monster dissolved, writhing, in the beam of a ray gun.

The second man stood up palely, and trembled with fear. 'My God, I swear I won't touch the stuff again. Talk about pink elephants—'

Yoal was curious. 'To what *stuff* do you refer, revived one?'

'The old hooch, the poison in the old hip pocket flask, the juice they gave me at that speak.. my lordie!'

Captain Gorsid looked questioningly at Yoal. 'Need we linger?'

Yoal hesitated: 'I am curious.' He addressed the man. 'If I were to tell you that we were visitors from another star, what

would be your reaction?'

The man stared at him. He was obviously puzzled, but the fear was stronger. 'Now, look,' he said, 'I was driving along, minding my own business. I admit I'd had a shot or two too many, but it's the liquor they serve these days. I swear I didn't see the other car – and if this is some new idea of punishing

people who drink and drive, well, you've won. I won't touch another drop as long as I live, so help me.'

Yoal said: 'He drives a "car" and thinks nothing of it. Yet we saw no cars; they didn't even bother to preserve them in the museum.'

Enash noticed that everyone waited for everyone else to comment. He stirred as he realized the circle of silence would be complete unless he spoke. He said:

'Ask him to describe the car. How does it work?'

'Now, you're talking,' said the man. 'Bring on your line of chalk, and I'll walk it, and ask any questions you please. I may be so tight that I can't see straight, but I can always drive. How does it work? You just put her in gear, and step on the gas.'

'Gas,' said engineering officer Veed. 'The internal combustion engine. That places him.'

Captain Gorsid motioned to the guard with the ray gun.

The third man sat up, and looked at them thoughtfully. 'From the stars?' he said finally. 'Have you a system, or was it blind chance?'

The Ganae councillors in that domed room stirred uneasily in their curved chairs. Enash caught Yoal's eye on him; the shock in the historian's eyes alarmed the meteorologist. He thought: 'The two-legged one's adjustment to a new situation, his grasp of realities, was abnormally rapid. No Ganae could have equalled the swiftness of the reaction.'

Hamar, the chief biologist, said: 'Speed of thought is not necessarily a sign of superiority. The slow, careful thinker has his place in the hierarchy of intellect.'

But, Enash found himself thinking, it was not the speed; it was the accuracy of the response. He tried to imagine himself being revived from the dead, and understanding instantly the meaning of the presence of aliens from the stars. He couldn't have done it.

He forgot his thought, for the man was out of the case. As Enash watched with the others, he walked briskly over to the window and looked out. One glance, and then he turned back.

'Is it all like this?' he asked.

Once again, the speed of his understanding caused a sensation. It was Yoal who finally replied.

'Yes. Desolation. Death. Ruin. Have you any idea as to what

happened?’

The man came back and stood in front of the energy screen that guarded the Ganae. ‘May I look over the museum? I have to estimate what age I am in. We had certain possibilities of destruction when I was last alive, but which one was realized depends on the time elapsed.’

The councillors looked at Captain Gorsid, who hesitated; then ‘Watch him,’ he said to the guard with the ray gun. He faced the man. ‘We understand your aspirations fully. You would like to seize control of this situation, and insure you own safety. Let me reassure you. Make no false moves, and all will be well.’

Whether or not the man believed the lie, he gave no sign. Nor did he show by a glance or a movement that he had seen the scarred floor where the ray gun had burned his two predecessors into nothingness. He walked curiously to the nearest doorway, studied the other guard who waited there for him, and then, gingerly, stepped through. The first guard followed him, then came the mobile energy screen, and finally, trailing one another, the councillors. Enash was the third to pass through the doorway. The room contained skeletons and plastic models of animals. The room beyond that was what, for want of a better term, Enash called a culture room. It contained the artifacts from a single period of civilization. It looked very advanced. He had examined some of the machines when they first passed through it, and had thought: Atomic energy. He was not alone in his recognition. From behind him Captain Gorsid said:

‘You are forbidden to touch anything. A false move will be the signal for the guards to fire.’

The man stood at ease in the center of the room. In spite of a curious anxiety, Enash had to admire his calmness. He must have known what his fate would be, but he stood there thoughtfully, and said finally, deliberately:

‘I do not need to go any farther. Perhaps, you will be able

better than I to judge of the time that has elapsed since I was born and these machines were built. I see over there an instrument which, according to the sign above it, counts atoms when they explode. As soon as the proper number have exploded it shuts off the power automatically, and for just the right length of time to prevent a chain explosion. In my time we had a thousand crude devices for limiting the size of an atomic reaction, but it required two thousand years to develop those devices from the early beginnings of atomic energy. Can you make a comparison?’

The councillors glanced at Veed. The engineering officer hesitated. At last, reluctantly: ‘Nine thousand years ago we had a thousand methods of limiting atomic explosions.’ He paused, then even more slowly, ‘I have never heard of an instrument that

counts out atoms for such a purpose.'

'And yet,' murmured Shun, the astronomer breathlessly, 'the race was destroyed.'

There was silence – that ended as Gorsid said to the nearest guard, 'Kill the monster!'

But it was the guard who went down, bursting into flame. Not just one guard, but the guards! Simultaneously down, burning with a blue flame. The flame licked at the screen, recoiled, and licked more furiously, recoiled and burned brighter. Through a haze of fire, Enash saw that the man had retreated to the far door, and that the machine that counted atoms was glowing with a blue intensity.

Captain Gorsid shouted into his communicator: 'Guard all exits with ray guns. Spaceships stand by to kill alien with heavy guns.'

Somebody said: 'Mental control, some kind of mental control. What have we run into?'

They were retreating. The blue fire was at the ceiling, struggling to break through the screen. Enash had a last glimpse of the machine. It must still be counting atoms, for it was a hellish blue. Enash raced with the others to the room where the man had been resurrected. There another energy screen crashed to their rescue. Safe now, they retreated into their separate bubbles and whisked through outer doors and up to the ship. As the great ship soared, an atomic bomb

hurtled down from it. The mushroom of flame blotted out the museum and the city below.

'But we still don't know why the race died.' Yoal whispered into Enash's ear, after the thunder had died from the heavens behind them.

The pale yellow sun crept over the horizon on the third morning after the bomb was dropped – the eighth day since the landing. Enash floated with the others down on a new city. He had come to argue against any further revival.

'As a meteorologist,' he said, 'I pronounce this planet safe for Ganae colonization. I cannot see the need for taking 'any risks. This race has discovered the secrets of its nervous system and we cannot afford—'

He was interrupted. Hamar, the biologist, said dryly: 'If they knew so much why didn't they migrate to other star systems and save themselves?'

'I will concede,' said Enash, 'that very possibly they had not discovered our system of locating stars with planetary families.' He looked earnestly around the circle of his friends. 'We have agreed that was a unique accidental discovery. We were lucky, not clever.'

He saw by the expressions on their faces that they were

mentally refuting his arguments. He felt a helpless sense of imminent catastrophe. For he could see that picture of a great race facing death. It must have come swiftly, but not so swiftly that they didn't know about it. There were too many skeletons in the open, lying in the gardens of the magnificent homes, as if each man and his wife had come out to wait for the doom of his kind.

He tried to picture it for the council, that last day long, long ago, when a race had calmly met its ending. But his visualization failed somehow, for the others shifted impatiently in the seats that had been set up behind the series of energy screens, and Captain Gorsid said:

'Exactly what aroused this intense emotional reaction in you, Enash?'

The question gave Enash pause. He hadn't thought of it as emotional. He hadn't realized the nature of his obsession, so

subtly had it stolen upon him. Abruptly, now, he realized.

'It was the third one,' he said slowly. 'I saw him through the haze of energy fire, and he was standing there in the distant doorway watching us curiously, just before we turned to run. His bravery, his calm, the skilful way he had duped us – it all added up.'

'Added up to his death?' said Hamar. And everybody laughed.

'Come now, Enash,' said Vice-Captain Mayad good-humoredly, 'you're not going to pretend that this race is braver than our own, or that, with all the precautions we have now taken, we need fear one man?'

Enash was silent, feeling foolish. The discovery that he had had an emotional obsession abashed him. He did not want to appear unreasonable. One final protest he made.

'I merely wish to point out,' he said doggedly, 'that this desire to discover what happened to a dead race does not seem absolutely essential to me.'

Captain Gorsid waved at the biologist. 'Proceed,' he said, 'with the revival.'

To Enash, he said: 'Do we dare return to Gana, and recommend mass migrations – and then admit that we did not actually complete our investigations here? It's impossible, my friend.'

It was the old argument, but reluctantly now Enash admitted there was something to be said for that point of view.

He forgot that, for the fourth man was stirring.

The man sat up – and vanished.

There was a blank, startled, horrified silence. Then Captain Gorsid said harshly:

'He can't get out of there. We know that. He's in there somewhere.'

All around Enash, the Ganae were out of their chairs, peering

into the energy shell. The guards stood with ray guns held limply in their suckers. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the protective screen technicians beckon to Veed, who went over – and came back grim.

‘I’m told the needles jumped ten points when he first disappeared. That’s on the nucleonic level.’

‘By ancient Ganae!’ Shun whispered. ‘We’ve run into what we’ve always feared.’

Gorsid was shouting into the communicator. ‘Destroy all the locators on the ship. Destroy them, do you hear!’

He turned with glary eyes. ‘Shun,’ he bellowed, ‘they don’t seem to understand. Tell those subordinates of yours to act. All locators and reconstructors must be destroyed.’

‘Hurry, hurry!’ said Shun weakly.

When that was done they breathed more easily. There were grim smiles and a tensed satisfaction. ‘At least,’ said Vice Captain Mayad, ‘he cannot now ever discover Gana. Our great system of locating suns with planets remains our secret. There can be no retaliation for—’ He stopped, said slowly, ‘What am I talking about? We haven’t done anything. We’re not responsible for the disaster that has befallen the inhabitants of this planet.’

But Enash knew what he had meant. The guilt feelings came to the surface at such moments as this – the ghosts of all the races destroyed by the Ganae, the remorseless will that had been in them, when they first landed, to annihilate whatever was here. The dark abyss of voiceless hate and terror that lay behind them; the days on end when they had mercilessly poured poisonous radiation down upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of peaceful planets – all that had been in Mayad’s words.

‘I still refuse to believe he has escaped.’ That was Captain Gorsid. ‘He’s in there. He’s waiting for us to take down our screens, so he can escape. Well, we won’t do it.’

There was silence again, as they stared expectantly into the energy shell – into the emptiness of the energy shell. The reconstructor rested on its metal supports, a glittering affair. But there was nothing else. Not a flicker of unnatural light or shade. The yellow rays of the sun bathed the open spaces with a brilliance that left no room for concealment.

‘Guards,’ said Gorsid, ‘destroy the reconstructor. I thought he might come back to examine it, but we can’t take a chance on that.’

It burned with a white fury; and Enash who had hoped

somehow that the deadly energy would force the two-legged thing into the open, felt his hopes sag within him.

‘But where can he have gone?’ Yoal whispered.

Enash turned to discuss the matter. In the act of swinging around, he saw that the monster was standing under a tree a



score of feet to one side, watching them. He must have arrived *that* moment, for there was a collective gasp from the councillors. Everybody drew back. One of the screen technicians, using great presence of mind, jerked up an energy screen between the Ganae and the monster. The creature came forward slowly. He was slim of build, he held his head well back. His eyes shone as from an inner fire.

He stopped as he came to the screen, reached **Out** and touched it with his fingers. It flared, blurred with changing colors; the colors grew brighter, and extended in an intricate pattern all the way from his head to the ground. The blur cleared. The colors drew back into the pattern. The pattern faded into invisibility~ The man was through the screen.

He laughed, a Xsoft sound; then sobered. 'When I first wakened,' he said, 'I was curious about the situation. The question was, what should I do with you?'

The words had a fateful ring to Enash on the still morning air of that planet of the dead. A voice broke the silence, a voice so strained and unnatural that a moment passed before he recognized it as belonging to Captain Gorsid.

*'Kill him I'*

When the blasters ceased their effort, the unkillable thing remained standing. He walked slowly forward until he was only half a dozen feet from the nearest Ganae. Enash had a position well to the rear. The man said slowly:

'Two courses suggest themselves, one based on gratitude for reviving me, the other based on reality. I know you for what you are. Yes, *know* you – and that is unfortunate. It is hard to feel merciful.

'To begin with,' he went on, 'let us suppose you surrender the secret of the locator. Naturally, now that a system exists, we shall never again be caught as we were—'

Enash had been intent, his mind so alive with the potentialities of the disaster that was here that it seemed impossible he could think of anything else. And yet, now a part of his attention was stirred.

'What did happen?'

The man changed color. The emotions of that far day thickened his voice. 'A nucleonic storm. It swept in from outer space. It brushed this edge of our galaxy. It was about ninety light-years in diameter, beyond the farthest limits of our power. There was no escape from it. We had dispensed with spaceships, and had no time to construct any. Castor, the only star with planets ever discovered by us, was also in the path of the storm.'

He stopped. 'The secret?' he said.

Around Enash, the councillors were breathing easier. The

fear of race destruction that had come to them was lifting. Enash saw with pride that the first shock was over, and they were not even afraid for themselves.

‘Ah,’ said Yoal softly, ‘you don’t know the secret. In spite of all your development, we alone can conquer the galaxy.’

He looked at the others smiling confidently. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘our pride in a great Ganae achievement is justified. I suggest we return to our ship. We have no further business on this planet.’

There was a confused moment while their bubbles formed, when Enash wondered if the two-legged one would try to stop their departure. But the man, when he looked back, was walking in a leisurely fashion along a street.

That was the memory Enash carried with him, as the ship began to move. That and the fact that the three atomic bombs they dropped, one after the other, failed to explode.

‘We will not,’ said Captain Gorsid, ‘give up a planet as easily as that. I propose another interview with the creature.’

They were floating down again into the city, Enash and Yoal and Veed and the commander. Captain Gorsid’s voice tuned in once more:

... As I visualize it’ – through mist Enash could see the transparent glint of the other three bubbles around him – ‘we

jumped to conclusions about this creature, not justified by the evidence. For instance, when he awakened, he vanished. Why? Because he was afraid, of course. He wanted to size up the situation. *He* didn’t believe he was omnipotent.’

It was sound logic. Enash found himself taking heart from it. Suddenly, he was astonished that he had become panicky so easily. He began to see the danger in a new light. One man, only one man, alive on a new planet. If they were determined enough, colonists could be moved in as if he did not exist. It had been done before, he recalled. On several planets, small groups of the original populations had survived the destroying radiation, and taken refuge in remote areas. In almost every case, the new colonists gradually hunted them down. In two instances, however, that Enash remembered native races were still holding small sections of their planets. In each case, it had been found impractical to destroy them because it would have endangered the Ganae on the planet. So the survivors were tolerated.

One man would not take up very much room.

When they found him, he was busily sweeping **Out** the lower floor of a small bungalow. He put the broom aside, and stepped onto the terrace outside. He had put on sandals, and he wore a loose-fitting robe made of very shiny material. He eyed them indolently but he said nothing.

It was Captain Gorsid who made the proposition. Enash had to admire the story he told into the language machine. The commander was very frank. That approach had been decided on. He pointed out that the Ganae could not be expected to revive the dead of this planet. Such altruism would be unnatural considering that the ever-growing Ganae hordes had a continual need for new worlds. Each vast new population increment was a problem that could be solved by one method only. In this instance, the colonists would gladly respect the rights of the sole survivor of the— It was at that point that the man interrupted. ‘But what is the purpose of this endless expansion?’ He seemed genuinely curious. ‘What will happen when you finally occupy every planet in this galaxy?’

Captain Gorsid’s puzzled eyes met Yoal’s, then flashed to

Veed, then Enash. Enash shrugged his torso negatively, and felt pity for the creature. The man didn’t understand, possibly never could understand. It was the old story of two different viewpoints, the virile and the decadent, the race that aspired to the stars and the race that declined the call of destiny.

‘Why not,’ urged the man, ‘control the breeding chambers?’

‘And have the government overthrown!’ said Yoal.

He spoke tolerantly, and Enash saw that the others were smiling at the man’s naivete. He felt the intellectual gulf between them widening. The man had no comprehension of the natural life forces that were at work. He said now:

‘Well, if you don’t control them, we will control them for you.’

There was silence.

They began to stiffen, Enash felt it in himself, saw the signs of it in the others. His gaze flicked from face to face, then back to the creature in the doorway. Not for the first time Enash had the thought that their enemy seemed helpless.

‘Why,’ he almost decided, ‘I could put my suckers around him and crush him.’

He wondered if mental control of nucleonic nuclear and gravitonic energies included the ability to defend oneself from a macrocosmic attack. He had an idea it did. The exhibition of power two hours before might have had limitations, but, if so, it was not apparent.

Strength or weakness could make no difference. The threat of threats had been made: ‘If you don’t control – we will.’

The words echoed in Enash’s brain, and, as the meaning penetrated deeper, his aloofness faded. He had always regarded himself as a spectator. Even when, earlier, he had argued against the revival, he had been aware of a detached part of himself watching the scene rather than being a part of it. He saw with a sharp clarity that that was why he had finally yielded to the

conviction of the others.

Going back beyond that to remoter days, he saw that he had never quite considered himself a participant in the seizure of the planets of other races. He was the one who looked on, and thought of reality, and speculated on a life that seemed to have no meaning.

It was meaningless no longer. He was caught by a tide of irresistible emotion, and swept along. He felt himself sinking, merging with the Ganae mass being. All the strength and all the will of the race surged up in his veins.

He snarled: 'Creature, if you have any hopes of reviving your dead race, abandon them now.'

The man looked at him, but said nothing. Enash rushed on:

'If you could destroy us, you would have done so already. But the truth is that you operate within limitations. Our ship is so built that no conceivable chain reaction could be started in it. For every plate of potential unstable material in it there is a counteracting plate, which prevents the development of a critical pile. You might be able to set off explosions in our engines, but they, too, would be limited, and would merely start the process for which they are intended – confined in their proper space.'

He was aware of Yoal touching his arm. 'Careful,' warned the historian. 'Do not in your just anger give away vital information.'

Enash shook off the restraining sucker. 'Let us not be unrealistic,' he said harshly. 'This thing has divined most of our racial secrets, apparently merely by looking at our bodies. We would be acting childishly if we assumed that he has not already realized the possibility of the situation.'

*'Enash I'* Captain Gorsid's voice was imperative.

As swiftly as it had come Enash's rage subsided. He stepped back.

'Yes, commander.'

'I think I know what you intended to say,' said Captain Gorsid. 'I assure you I am in full accord, but I believe also that I, as the top Ganae official, should deliver the ultimatum.'

He turned. His horny body towered above the man.

'You have made the unforgivable threat. You have told us, in effect, that you will attempt to restrict the vaulting Ganae spirit —'

'Not the spirit,' said the man. He laughed softly. 'No, not the spirit.'

The commander ignored the interruption. 'Accordingly, we have no alternative. We are assuming that, given time to

locate the materials and develop the tools, you might be able to build a reconstructor.

‘In our opinion it will be at least two years before you can complete it, *even if you know how*. It is an immensely intricate machine not easily assembled by the lone survivor of a race that gave up its machines millennia before disaster struck.

‘You did not have time to build a spaceship.

‘We won’t give you time to build a reconstructor.

‘Within a few minutes our ship will start dropping bombs. It is possible you will be able to prevent explosions in your vicinity. We will start, accordingly, on the other side of the planet. If you stop us there, then we will assume we need help.

‘In six months of traveling at top acceleration, we can reach a point where the nearest Ganae planet would hear our messages. They will send a fleet so vast that all your powers of resistance will be overcome. By dropping a hundred or a thousand bombs every minute we will succeed in devastating every city, so that not a grain of dust will remain of the skeletons of your people.

‘That is our plan.’

‘So it shall be.’

‘Now, do your worst to us who are at your mercy.’

The man shook his head. ‘I shall do nothing – now!’ he said. He paused, then thoughtfully, ‘Your reasoning is fairly accurate. – Fairly. Naturally, I am not all powerful, but it seems to me you have forgotten one little point.

‘I won’t tell you what it is.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘good day to you. Get back to your ship, and be on your way. I have much to do.’

Enash had been standing quietly, aware of the fury building up in him again. Now, with a hiss, he sprang forward, suckers outstretched. They were almost touching the smooth flesh – when something snatched at him.

He was back on the ship.

He had no memory of movement, no sense of being dazed or harmed. He was aware of Veed and Yoal and Captain Gorsid standing near him as astonished as he himself. Enash remained very still, thinking of what the man had said:

‘... *Forgotten one little point.*’ Forgotten? That meant they knew. What could it be? He was still pondering about it when Yoal said:

‘We can be reasonably certain our bombs alone will not work.’

They didn’t.

Forty light-years Out from Earth, Enash was summoned to the council chambers. Yoal greeted him wanly:

‘The monster is aboard.’

The thunder of that poured through Enash, and with it came a sudden comprehension. ‘That was what he meant we had forgotten,’ he said finally, aloud and wonderingly, ‘that he can

travel through space at will within a limit – what was the figure he once used – of ninety light-years.’

He sighed. He was not surprised that the Ganae, who had to use ships, would not have thought immediately of such a possibility. Slowly, he began to retreat from the reality. Now that the shock had come, he felt old and weary, a sense of his mind withdrawing again to its earlier state of aloofness.

It required a few minutes to get the story. A physicist’s assistant, on his way to the storeroom, had caught a glimpse of a man in a lower corridor. In such a heavily manned ship, the wonder was that the intruder had escaped earlier observation. Enash had a thought.

‘But after all we are not going all the way to one of our planets. How does he expect to make use of us to locate it if we only use video—’ He stopped. That was it, of course. Directional video beams would have to be used, and the man would travel in the right direction the instant contact was made.

Enash saw the decision in the eyes of his companions, the only possible decision under the circumstances. And yet – it seemed to him they were missing some vital point.

He walked slowly to the great video plate at one end of the chamber. There was a picture on it, so vivid, so sharp, so majestic that the unaccustomed mind would have reeled as from a stunning blow. Even to him, who knew the scene, there came a constriction, a sense of unthinkable vastness. It was a

video view of a section of the milky way. Four hundred *million* stars as seen through telescopes that could pick up the light of a red dwarf at thirty thousand light-years.

The video plate was twenty-five yards in diameter – a scene that had no parallel elsewhere in the plenum. Other galaxies simply did not have that many stars.

Only one in two hundred thousand of those glowing suns had planets.

That was the colossal fact that compelled them now to an irrevocable act. Wearily, Enash looked around him.

‘The monster had been very clever,’ he said quietly. ‘If we go ahead, he goes with us – obtains a reconstructor and returns by his method to his planet. If we use the directional beam, he flashes along it, obtains a reconstructor and again reaches his planet first. In either event, by the time our fleets arrived back there, he would have revived enough of his kind to thwart any attack we could mount.’

He shook his torso. The picture was accurate, he felt sure, but it still seemed incomplete. He said slowly:

‘We have one advantage now. Whatever decision we make, there is no language machine to enable him to learn what it is. We can carry out our plans without his knowing what they will be. He knows that neither he nor we can blow up the ship. That

leaves us one real alternative.’

It was- Captain Gorsid who broke the silence that followed. ‘Well, gentlemen, I see we know our minds. We will set the engines, blow up the controls –and take him with us.’

They looked at each other, race pride in their eyes. Enash touched suckers with each in turn.

An hour later, when the heat was already considerable, Enash had the thought that sent him staggering to the communicator, to call Shun, the astronomer.

‘Shun,’ he yelled, ‘when the monster first awakened – remember Captain Gorsid had difficulty getting your subordinates to destroy the locators. We never thought to ask them what the delay was. Ask them. ...ask them—’

There was a pause, then Shun’s voice came weakly over the roar of static:

‘They. ... couldn’t. ... get. ... into. ... the. ... room. The door was locked.’

Enash sagged to the floor. They had missed more than one point, he realized. The man had awakened, realized the situation; and, when he vanished, he had gone to the ship, and there discovered the secret of the locator and possibly the secret of the reconstructor – if he didn’t know it previously. By the time he reappeared, he already had from them what he wanted. All the rest must have been designed to lead them to this act of desperation.

In a few moments, now, *he* would be leaving the ship secure in the knowledge that shortly no alien mind would know his planet existed. Knowing, too, that his race would live again, and this time never die.

Enash staggered to his feet; clawed at the roaring communicator, and shouted his new understanding into it. There was no answer. It clattered with the static of uncontrollable and inconceivable energy.

The heat was peeling his armored hide, as he struggled to the matter transmitter. It flashed at him with purple flame. Back to the communicator he ran shouting and screaming.

He was still whimpering into it a few minutes later when the mighty ship plunged into the heart of a blue-white sun.