

AID:

Anti-Interrogation Device. Organic servomechanism. Standard equipment, all personnel, all branches, Terrestrial Union Armed Services. Current Mark: IX

*UESS Starraker* broke away from the oncoming elements of the ravaged TSN ship's destroyer screen and hurried into Hyperspace. With all Terrestrial prisoners on board, secured in an empty compartment, the ship turned her course for Eglis, and began the journey homeward.

In his compartment, Sub-captain Deven looked past Captain Kein's shoulder at the pile of data sheets on his desk. As he stood there, more sheets spilled out of the messenger box to the left of the pile.

"All right, Deven, what have we got so far?" Kein asked, his voice, as always, unconcerned with anything but the solution of the problem at hand.

"Nothing very much, sir. I won't have, until the technicians finish connecting the surveillance equipment in the prison compartment. So far, their course data confirms our original supposition that this is the ship that broke out of the net at Achernar. Since we have previous information that the same ship is the one that succeeded in penetrating the Home System in the first place, it follows that whatever those three prisoners know, particularly since one of them is an officer, will probably contain the information that would have made it possible for the Terrestrials to coordinate their actions with those of the Dissolutionists."

"Eh? What do you know about the Dissolutionists?" Kein's voice was digging.

Deven grimaced slightly with involuntary annoyance before he composed his face into a more suitable expression. "As Counterespionage and Intelligence Officer of this ship, I am frequently in possession of information which would not ordinarily be released to an officer of my rank and grade. I have known for some time that there is an insurrection on the other side of the Home System. I have not transmitted this information to anyone else, nor do I intend to. This is no more than was expected of me when I was trained for this commission."

He could not help feeling a certain satisfaction as Kein grudgingly accepted the fact.

*There's little enough to brighten up this berth,* he reflected, his somber, carefully schooled face betraying none of this. Kein was a combat officer by nature and inclination. Within the framework of his orders as he received them, the man operated efficiently and resourcefully, without

thought to ultimate principles or larger issues. Perhaps he was not so organized when away from his duty. Deven had no way of knowing or guessing. He had never seen him under such circumstances, and doubted if he ever would.

The other ship's officers were cut to more or less the same pattern. Some bordered on the fanatical, others were more deliberate and calculated in their thoughts and actions. There was Emer, but the PsychoWar Officer was as remote in his thinking, in his own specialized way, as the others.

"Nothing else?" Kein broke in on his reflection.

"Not for the present, sir. Once the surveillance equipment has been wired in to my analyzers, and I've gotten enough preliminary data, I'll attempt to interrogate the prisoners."

Kein frowned, his heavy brows drawing together. "Can't be done," he grunted.

Deven nodded, but shrugged. "No harm in trying," he said.

"As you wish," Kein said. "Nothing better to do, I suppose."

"No, sir," Deven said with a hidden half-smile. Kein walked away, his heels striking loudly on the deck composition.

Deven went to his desk and his data sheets, a clamp-light shining down from beside him, his forehead drawn. The Terrestrial ship had been carrying information which, if received by the TSN, would have meant a decided shift in the way the war was going. The progress of that information now had been cut off--so it was up to him to try and extract as much as he could from the three captured Terrans. Their ship, by raiding the transport routes into the Home System, had chanced across the news about the Dissolutionist Secession, which was drawing ships and men from the war. One of the Terrans was an officer. Perhaps, locked away somewhere in his brain, there was information which might be just as valuable to Eglis.

His frown deepened as he integrated more and more of the information plucked from the Terrestrial ship and embodied in the various separate reports. But, even as he frowned with concentration, another part of him was ready to bring forth an anticipatory smile.

Kein had been right. On the face of it, it was impossible to interrogate Terrestrials. No one had ever done it. But Deven was a brilliant man--the youngest of his rank in the United Eglin Spatial Fleet. He genuinely liked matching his wits against someone who knew something that UESF, too, wanted to know. It did not, in the final analysis, matter in the slightest what that secret might be or even that UESF would know it after it had

come through him. To Deven, the game itself was what counted. It was his function in the war.

*What about after the war?* he thought as he worked. What then, when the lucky chronological chance that gave him this opportunity had passed? Occupation duty in the remains of the Terrestrial Union? Would it still be the same, when the stakes were so much smaller, when, for every opponent of genuine intelligence, he would face a thousand hole-and-corner wineshop conspirators?

*Occupation duty?* Was he so sure the war would end with Eglin victory? Not for the first time, he realized that there was no deep-seated emotional response to the question. There was the matter of personal inconvenience, certainly. But he did not, as Kein would have, react indignantly, even within himself, nor, as Emer would have done--had he perceived the attitude in someone else--did he proceed to analyze the workings of his psyche.

A technician's call on the phone interrupted his thinking. The audiovisual pickups and other detectors had been wired into the compartment where the prisoners were held, and were now connected to the leads in his desk. He acknowledged the information, reflecting once again on the fact that very few circumstantial obstacles to the performance of his duty were actually annoying to him. The *Starraker*, for instance, had never been equipped with full-dress facilities for prisoner interrogation. No one had ever expected her to need them. Very well, he had been able to operate without them, and now had been content to wait until a jury-rigged approximation could be provided.

He cut in the audiovisual.

There were three prisoners, as he had known. Of the two crewmen, one was lying face-down in a corner, his back badly burned. Deven's face twisted with annoyance. The man's spinal cord and kidneys might be injured. If so, then he had better be questioned soon, if at all.

The other crewman was propped up against a bulkhead, smoking a cigarette. One of his calves had been burned, but he was otherwise unharmed. Deven picked up a microphone.

"Prisoners will refrain from smoking except during normal rest periods. Smoking overloads the atmospheric purifiers. We must remind the prisoners that Eglin oxygenation systems were *not* designed with foreign vices in mind."

The crewman displayed a definitely belligerent attitude. He took several defiant puffs before he ground the butt into the deck.

Deven's lips fell into a slight smile. There would be none of the "Come, now, you and I are just pawns in a game of interstellar chess" approach here.

The officer was a different matter. He lay on his blanket, his face up to the ceiling. Deven cut to a camera over his head, and saw that the man had been blinded by an otherwise superficial burn across his face. Deven's own face twitched.

But, there was the key. The officer was not even attempting to exercise any authority over the crewman-- who should have been reprimanded, if only for the benefit of the obvious watcher. So far as it was possible to tell, no attempt had been made to organize the three prisoners into a cohesive unit. Therefore, the officer, for one reason or the other, was unable to take the initiative.

Deven considered the problem for a moment, then pulled the wall phone from its bracket.

"C and I. Get me PsychoWar," he said, meanwhile leafing through the stack of sheets on his desk.

"PsychoWar."

"Emer? Deven. What's the latest line of guff the Terries've been feeding their people? Are they still fighting Interstellar Aggression, or has it been shifted to a personalized hatred for Eglins and Eglis?"

"Still using the 'principles and human rights must be upheld' business, as far as I know. One approach is as realistic as the other, I guess. Why?"

Deven hesitated. "I don't know,' exactly--not enough data yet. How hostile to my presence would one of the captured Terries be?"

"Hm-m-m. For interrogation, eh? Officer or crew?"

"Either."

"You'd get farther with the officer, I think." This time, it was the PsychoWar officer who hesitated. "I don't see much point to it, frankly. If you're interested in . . . what is it, baseball? . . . schedules, or gossip about their various home towns, fine, but you're not. And you're certainly not going to get anything else. They've got this gimmick--"

"I know all about the gimmick," Deven said. "It operates exactly like the kind of thing I'd have designed myself, if I thought we could build one. Those Terries! They're quick with their sciences. But I think I can crack this one. If I'm wrong--well, we haven't lost anything."

"No, I suppose not," Emer said. "You know, this sounds like PsychoWar ought to cut itself a slice."

"No!" Deven said quickly. "This one's all mine. It ought to be fun."

"All right," Emer said. His voice held the restrained note it always carried when he was trying not to give away too much of his personal reactions. "I wish you'd stop regarding this war as a fascinating contest between yourself and some phantom opposite number on the Terrie side, though."

Deven chuckled. "As far as I'm concerned, that's exactly what it is. Larger issues? I'm aware of them--but they're far too complex for accurate analysis. Whoever heard of an accurate contemporary evaluation of an historical trend? Maybe the Terries are destined to rule the galaxy in our place--and maybe they're not. That's for some deity to become ulcerous about. Patriotism? Atrocity stories? Interstellar Vengeance? I've read too many books, Emer, and gone too far inside the petty motivations that make men do the fundamentally useless things they do. Instill the fighting spirit in the crewmen, Emer. An efficient officer adopts the attitude best suited to his work. He's an officer because he can function on brains, not some emotional drive."

Emer sighed and hung up. Deven put his own phone back on the bracket, smiling as he did so. He enjoyed digging his heels into the PsychoWar officer occasionally. Emer was very vulnerable. Being just as capable in his line as Deven was in his, he knew, but couldn't admit, that the C&I Officer was right.

He cut back into the analysis circuits on the prisoners, and found what he had expected. They were behaving exactly as three similarly situated Eglins would have been--except that their respiration, blood pressure, heartbeat, and body temperatures were strictly normal for the physical conditions prevailing. The Terrans showed not the slightest sign of tension, apprehension, or fear.

Wilben, the Terrestrial officer, sat in his chair opposite Deven's desk. His ravaged face had been treated by a medical technician who had worked silently while Deven gave directions in a calm, but audibly concerned, voice. In fact, Deven had seen to it-- conspicuously, perhaps, but seen to it nevertheless--that Wilben was comfortable, and, for the first time since the lifecraft fished him out of space, had some assurance of the fact that there were hands to help him, eyes to guide his future course.

Wilben was not good officer material. Deven had found out soon enough that he had been the TSN ship's Mess Officer. He liked to talk. His bewilderment increased his natural propensities along this line. His past was an open book to Deven-- along with his hopes, fears, and aspirations.

But his name was Charles Wilben, Lieutenant (JG) TSNR, BUSPAC 02651-T-29, and as far as military information was concerned, that was all.

Deven stifled a sigh and opened a drawer. "Cigarette, Chuck?"

"Thanks," the officer said, and puffed on it gratefully. "They say smoking's no good if you don't see the smoke," he observed after a moment. "Psychological, or something." He chuckled bravely. "Seems all right to me, though. Guess I'm a real slave to nicotine, yes sir!"

"Guess so," Deven agreed, laughing comfortably. In his perverse way, he was enjoying even this frustration. "Funny habit, smoking," he said casually. "No parallel on Eglis. Odd how two races can be so similar, even in general psychological make-up, and still be so different in details. I understand that Eglis and Earth even look generally alike--about the same landwater ratio, and everything else. I've seen maps and models of Earth, of course, but I've never been there. What's it like--from an Earthman's point of view? What's the country like, where you were born? Rural, metropolitan, suburban, what? What do you remember best about Earth?"

"I--" There was a halt. Then Wilben murmured in a monotone. "Was about to say something which would have involved information I subconsciously decided to be of military importance. " He stopped again. "Sorry," he added in his normally inflected voice.

Deven shook his head sharply in exasperation--and smiled simultaneously at the fact that the rules of this particular game allowed him this usually repressed outward expression.

He leaned back, shifting his weight enough so that the chair's inclining ratchet slipped a notch, and let him assume a more relaxed position.

*Well, what did I expect?* he said to himself ruefully. A device which prevented the interrogation of captured personnel would naturally:

(A)

Not prevent the subject from furnishing any nonconsequential information.

(B)

Would be one hundred per cent effective in cutting off the flow of information before even vague hints of any other nature could be elicited from the subject under interrogation.

The specifications were his own. It struck a responsive spark in him to see that the Terrestrials had paralleled them exactly. *More's the luck*, he thought, *they actually found out how to do it*. He'd seen the laconic official catalogue entry. Organic servomechanism, eh? And what was that

supposed to mean? Some kind of impression on the brain-paths, most likely. A complicated and interlaced pattern, with high discriminatory powers borrowed, no doubt, from the subject's own subconscious. Hypnosis of some kind?. And what about that discrimination? How did the device distinguish between foe and a friend qualified to have the information passed to him?

Well, he'd have to try the hypnosis angle.

Four hours later, Deven had established that "organic servomechanism" either meant something other than a posthypnotic suggestion, or else a hypnosis so firmly--in fact, almost viciously--implanted that his own best efforts were useless.

He stopped and caught his lower lip between his teeth. What now? The sodiae? He shook his head. Under specification (B) came subspecification:

(1)

Would remain operative even, and especially, when the subject was not otherwise conscious; i.e., asleep, in shock, or under sedation, anesthesia, or other drugging.

The phone buzzed and he took it, somewhat grateful for the interruption. He listened for a moment, then permitted himself a sharply hurled curse. He caught himself rapidly. Wilben was conscious, and had heard his reaction. Deven put even that to use.

Audibly simmering, he let a mutter about stupidity escape him. Then, his voice apologetic, he turned to the bewildered officer.

"I'm sorry--very sorry. I've just been informed that the badly injured crewman died--and that the other one was killed when he resisted a detail that was sent to remove the body."

*Pressure*, he thought. *He's the only one left. It's going to be a lonely and miserable life. Blind. So far away from home and help.* If he could strike deeper into the subconscious than the device--

He pictured the processes of the TSN officer's mind. There was no hope, now. No chance of escape--and not even the comfort of companionship. Already, the multiplied fear of the dark and of helplessness were striking deep at the roots of the man's thinking. Now there was loneliness, as well. *The basics. Attack along the basics. Strike at his childhood fears. Get to him before the device was put into his mind.*

"I . . . I don't know--" the officer said helplessly.

*That's it!* His mind pounced ruthlessly, but his voice showed none of that. "If there's anything I could do--You understand that the man in charge of the detail had no orders. The action was unpremeditated--" He mouthed a series of apologies. Then:

"You understand, of course, that this ship is manned by a crew geared to thinking of Earthmen as deadly enemies. There's only so much I can personally do. But if you were to cooperate, why then--" Crude. Crude, and probably purposeless. What cosmic secrets could be held in *that* brain? But the game--to break the Terran device. Crude--but good enough for this frightened man.

He watched the sweat break out in the officer's palms with satisfaction. The man's posture and nervous squirming were as indicative as signboards. Any conditioning the TSN might have given him could not circumvent this overwhelming appeal to basics that had been irrevocably established before he was out of his crib.

Wilben cracked. There was no special additional outward sign, but Deven's infallible instincts told him the barriers were down. He leaned forward.

Wilben slumped sideward, dead.

Deven straightened up, slapping his open palm against his knee.

(C)

This device would not be injurious to personnel, up to a point. Provision would have to be made for the stage at which death might be the only means to continue the evasion of questioning.

Abruptly, Deven spun on his heel and picked up the telephone again. "C and I. Get your burial detail down here," he snapped into it, then marched out of the compartment and strode up to the bridge.

Captain Kein had no warning. Deven burned him down, and the crewmen on watch as well. Moving swiftly, he set the ship's automatics and then ran out of the control room, getting to the lifecraft cradle just as the ship snapped out into Space Prime. He was out and well clear of the plunging ship when the automatics flicked her back into Hyperspace again.

The lifecraft was stocked with food and water for fifteen men for thirty days. There were the usual boredom-interrupting devices. He set a course he knew would be intercepted by a TSN ship, put the proper recognition signal on the peripheral field, and waited.

He was plagued by no self-accusations of treachery. War was a chess game, containing within its macrocosm the microscopic games played by



its participants. He had resigned, for good and logical reason. If a war could be initiated for the cold-blooded purpose of establishing spheres of influence, of gaining control of mineral resources or trade routes, or whatever the reason had been--even if this politicoeconomic motivation *was* concealed behind impressive slogans and stirring propaganda--then, ultimately, he was certainly justified in just as cold-bloodedly taking whatever decisive steps he saw fit.

He said as much to the TSN Intelligence Officer. He sat in a comfortable chair on the opposite side of the officer's desk--where Wilben had sat, aboard the *Starraker*, he remembered. He smiled inwardly at the parallel.

*And here is my phantom opposite number*, he thought, studying the TSN Intelligence man. The officer was older than he was. Short bristles of gray stood out in the black hair above his ears. His lips were framed by deeply etched lines on his cheeks, and his gray eyes were brooding, and somehow cold.

*Poor technique*, Deven thought. *Negates any other overtures of friendship.*

"You mentioned an insurrection, I think," the TSN man said.

Deven nodded amiably. "Yes," he said. "I should estimate that, at its height, the rebellion will draw off at least twenty per cent of the forces currently being employed against you. This peak will be reached in about one hundred GST days. At this time, a properly directed attack here "-- he pointed out sectors and co-ordinates on the star map with incisive slashes of his hand--"should enable you to split the fleet into four isolated fragments. After that, of course, you can probably demand a treaty. Or, if you prefer, you can cut up the individual segments at your leisure."

He stopped, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Anything else?" the officer asked.

*Too cold. The voice should be warmer*, Deven criticized to himself. These Earthmen, though--all alike. All machinelike--or, rather, like men dealing with a mechanism.

*I am still a personification of the enemy to them*, he realized. The fact that he had given them the key to victory counted for nothing in his favor. He shrugged.

"Tell me," the TSN man said, "as one professional to another"--*Ah, that's better*, Deven thought--"what was your experience with the Mark IX AID? You were unsuccessful in circumventing it."

"Most effective," Deven said. "Within its present limitations, of course."

"Oh?" The TSN officer's eyebrows were up.

"Certainly." Deven smiled. "Of course, even Earthmen can't be expected to pull a perfected device out of the hat every time. I imagine you'll improve on the current design. But, as it stands, the device fights only half the battle. The concealment of information is important, true--I might say, paramount under most circumstances. But, in a case such as we had here, where the subject was in the possession of previously unknown information, that information would ordinarily never have reached Earth. As a last resort, the device kills--and the information is lost."

The TSN officer's composure broke. "Then you're still under the impression that you deserted of your own volition? Excellent!" His voice was first incredulous, then exultant. "I've argued the hypothetical case many times!"

Deven felt his forehead and the skin around his eyes wrinkling as he stared intently at the officer.

"WHAT?"

"Of course, man!" The officer's expression as he looked at Deven was that of one professional for another he has just defeated. "You said yourself you'd specified your own version of the AID. Obviously, specification (D) must be:

In an emergency, or on the point of the subject's death, it might also be possible to record newly-acquired and significant information, or to transmit it by some means. In addition, it will be necessary to transmit all normal classified information to the subject's successor. Therefore, the ideal form for this device would be that of a semi-individualistic, discriminatory entity, in motile symbiotic link with the subject and succeeding subject(s)."

Deven kicked his chair back. Somewhere within him, he felt the words of professional admiration beginning to form at the verbal level. But he was, at bottom, a humanoid being. Snarling, he died fighting.

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