



The Canopans silently carried the bodies outside.

LAST NIGHT OUT

by LEE GREGOR

They shoved through the hate-filled crowds of Terra,
looking for a little pleasure, a little entertainment. For
tomorrow Ensign Grey and his blue-furred space-mate,
Canopus 43C, would go off to war—if tomorrow ever came.

THE UNFRIENDLY STREET stretched ahead of them, pouring bitter waves of hostility through their nervous systems. They had ridden the bus from the space-port into town, and now they stood on the pavement soaking up the profusion of sensations which permeated the atmosphere of the brawly town.

Joe, his iridescent fur registering a pale blue of distaste and his antennae quivering in a controlled

agitation, kept a warm tentacle curled firmly in the hand of Jed Grey. Since his native name was a soundless, telepathic abstraction, the records of the Solarian Fleet labeled him Canopus 647-B-43C. To Ensign Jed Grey, his Terran teammate, he was Joe.

The blue of Grey's Space Fleet uniform matched, for the moment, the evanescent hue of Joe's pelt, as, in a curious manner, the pattern created by Joe's thoughts matched that of Grey.

The sky had created a raucous sunset, challenging the lurid glitter of the neon signs which lined the main street of Selby, Texas. The light reflected garishly from the multicolored and multi-shaped uniforms which swarmed about the thoroughfare.

Terrans, scaly-headed Arcturians, spined Sirians, the dark and stocky inhabitants of a strange planet which circled a star whose name to Terran astronomers was only a number in the star catalogue—all of these walked in small groups along the length of the street, seeking a spot where they could relax for the evening and forget where they had been or where they were going.

Jed Grey asked Joe, "Where are the rest of your boys?"

Joe allowed his perceptual sense to range through the town, his sensitive antennae erect and rigid. Through the murky welter of conflicting thought patterns he sought the familiar, gentle sensation created by the furred Canopans.

"It's hard to find them," he transmitted to Grey. "I know they must be in town somewhere. They came on the bus before ours. But there are too many Terrans about and it is bad . . ."

JED GREY knew precisely how bad it was. Habitually en rapport with his Canopan partner, he sensed in every nerve the hostile atmosphere of the street, tearing at the hard shell of defense which he had learned to erect.

The Arcturians, habitually suspicious of strange planetary types, were sufficiently unpleasant in their thought patterns. However, it was from the native earthmen, whose blue uniforms vastly outnumbered all others, that the bulk of the torment arose.

Grey could sense it even though he avoided observing their faces. He could feel the alcoholic thoughts of the mechanic across the street: "An earthman holding hands with a snake! Damned snake man!"

It was now months since Grey had learned what that meant. The pain with which he had learned that was by now gone. He did not think that Joe's tentacles looked like snakes, and he cared nothing for the opinions of the others. Yet it was difficult to keep out of his mind the intruding thoughts of the Fleetmen who glared at him with disgust on their faces.

"I have found the others," Joe thought to Grey.

"They are in a small bar at the other end of town called the Purple Claw. It seems to be an interesting place."

There was no need for Joe to ask, "Shall we go there?" For there was no place else to go. This was a repetition of the problem which always occurred when the pair arrived at a new base or a new town. Where could they spend an evening?

It never occurred to Grey that he might go off by himself.

Making their way through the crowded street was no longer the ordeal which it had been when Jed Grey and Joe had first been assigned to work together. By this time it no longer turned Grey sick when a highly-painted female hysterically turned around and whined: "It's reading my mind! The damn snake's reading my mind!"

"I see that the Arcturians hang out at the Zig Zag," Joe observed. The Zig Zag's brilliant mercury-vapor sign made Grey's complexion a virulent blue as they passed beneath it.

"And extra police floating around," Grey noticed. "This is a bad town. Many transients here—on their way in or out. Coming to town for a big time—either the last one or the first one in months."

THE PURPLE CLAW was housed in a ramshackle building of ancient vintage, and sported as publicity a modest violet lobster which glowed erratically above the door.

Within, the air reeked of tobacco smoke, beer, telka. It heaved with the beat of something which was part American jazz, part Sirian drum-music, with a flavor of strains from half a dozen other star-systems.

Behind the bar was a monstrosity fat character whose hair was white as the clouds of Venus, and whose face was as black as space itself. Elby Jones had a love for wine and women which was matched only by his addiction to the music which the small band in the corner emitted.

He nodded to the pair as they entered, and waddled over to the small table where they seated themselves.

"Evenin', Joe and Mister Grey," he greeted them. "You'll have Space Punch and smokes?"

This, casually—even though never before had they been in this place.

Just as casual was Grey's reply, "Sure enough, Elby. Nice place you've got."

No need to show surprise at the fact that Jones was, himself, a telepath. The very fact that his place was the congregating point for the Canopan crowd attested to that probability.

With a goblet of warm Space Punch between his hands, Grey leaned back and absorbed the peace and relaxation which he had sensed within these walls the moment he had stepped through the door. Joe, immune to alcohol, took the first ecstatic drag from a long white cigarette—a cigarette of very ordinary tobacco.

Through the dimly-lit, smoke-laden atmosphere of the room, Grey could see the musicians at the far end, the small tables at which the Terrans sat with their Canopan partners, the few Sirians who sat alone with their telka glasses.

Joe, performing an indescribable feat of mental recognition, happily greeted a Sirian who sat across the room. To Grey the Sirians all appeared identical, but he received the impression that this was the one they'd gone on a tear with last month in Joplin. It had been a most memorable occasion. He suddenly laughed uproariously as he recalled the picture they'd made marching down Joplin's main thoroughfare singing the Sirian national anthem in harmony—with Joe taking two of the parts simultaneously—both mentally.

Joe, having no vocal apparatus, performed his music telepathically. At times it was indescribable, and at other times it was—well—magnificent.

Within the Purple Claw there was music permeating the smoky air, coursing through the nerve channels of the listeners. It was slow and hot, loose and tight at the same time.

Grey slipped down farther into his chair. A horn took a high passage, and the chill began to pass up and down Grey's spine. He knew, then, that he was in—that the night was good and the music right.

JOE'S ANTENNAE swayed quietly, in time with the beat, in time with the antennae of the other Canopans who sat there, spreading a net of rapport through the room. Imperceptibly there was produced an augmentation of the music, a heightened receptivity, as though the entire audience was in itself a musical instrument, guided by the band, and in return leading the band ahead.

"Lawdy, that was good," Grey sighed when the spell finally broke and the audience shuffled feet, scraped chairs, ordered fresh drinks, and re-lit forgotten smokes.

These moments of complete retreat had become more and more rare during the past few months.

The mobilization had been accelerating, and the training periods had become more and more intense, in preparation for this day when they were now assigned to a ship and were about to push off for a training run, followed by the long trip to the battle sector.

It had been slightly more than a year ago that the first enigmatic events had been noticed in a corner of the galaxy which was just newly being explored and developed. Ships had failed to return—colonies had ceased communicating with their prime bases.

To Jed Grey, a young man still in school on Terra, far within the borders of the civilized galaxy, these events had seemed distant and impersonal. They had been words in the newspapers, on the news broadcasts. They had been vague events taking place on just another of the many hundreds of habitable planets which by that time had been discovered.

Then the knowledge had grown that the events taking place thousands of light years distant were to have an impact on the life of Jed Grey and the others living on Terra. Gradually it developed that the civilized galaxy was rapidly becoming immersed in a struggle for existence against an enemy whose character was initially somewhat obscure, but whose unfriendly aims were quite definite.

Overnight, it seemed to Grey, Terra flew into a turmoil of mobilization, manufacture of spaceships and weapons, research for the creation of new weapons and new defenses against the strange attack methods of the enemy. In the tiny circle of existence in which he walked, that which he observed was the increased crowds of people on their way to work in the factories, the increased difficulty of buying various items, and inevitably the card which had ordered him to the mobilization center.

Among the many classification tests which they gave Grey was a curious one which seemed nonsensical until later on in the course of his training its purpose became quite obvious. It was given by a young man with very large and quiet eyes, who was seated beside an individual with soft, silky fur that changed color from moment to moment, and whose antennae had a fascinating, restless mobility. The four tentacles were brown

and graceful, while the total attitude of the creature was one of repose and dignity.

GREY STARED at this personage with curiosity, and with a slight chill. From photographs he knew the form of the natives of the fourth planet of Canopus, and from rumors and barroom tales he had heard sufficient concerning them to ring a note of alarm in his brain.

Yet, as he sat there for a moment, the alarm died away for although to his untrained eyes the Canopan was practically featureless, there was an aura of pleasantness about it appearing from a source which at that time he was not able to identify.

Into his mind the thought came, "What if they can read my mind, like everybody says? He doesn't look like he would hurt me. But . . ."

The voice of the examiner cut his thoughts short.

"Here are ten cards lying face down on the table. Tell me what markings are on the front of these cards."

"But how can I tell you if the cards are face down?"

The man smiled. "Just try, anyway."

Grey wanted to snort and laugh in the man's face; but then suddenly he shivered, for actually he knew . . .

"Why there's a circle, a square, a triangle, another circle . . ."

Then there was a sealed box in which he identified a cube, a sphere, a cylinder, and a more difficult object which turned out to be a key.

The examiner grinned at him and said, "That's fine. Welcome to the fraternity of telepaths and perceptrors."

And, amazingly, there came a thought of congratulation which was unmistakably from the Canopan, who extended a tentacle and laid it for a moment upon his arm.

A gate in his mind swung open. A flood of memories crowded into his consciousness. Small items. Incidents in which he had known things before he had seen them. Incidents so unaccountable that he had put them out of his mind, had refused to consider them. Now they jigsawed together into a pattern which revolved about the important fact that he possessed the rare skill of perception coupled with telepathy.

How rudimentary this skill was he realized later

when his training began.

In a month, feeling drab in his work uniform and exhausted from the preliminary training, he was brought face to face with the Canopan whom he soon learned to call Joe, and who was to become his partner for as long as should be necessary.

THE FIRST MEETING was stilted and formal. They sat in the small room together with the Terran and Canopan training officers, and within Grey there was the nervous sensation that the Canopans recognized every one of his thoughts. There was the embarrassing realization that his dislike of Canopans was as plain to them as the expression on his face, and the embarrassment was intensified by the fact that he had not the slightest idea why the dislike was there.

"Sure, Grey," the officer said, abruptly. "We know you don't like Canopans. Nobody on earth does—except the people who actually know them. We know the whole story. But you'll get over that. You're going to spend the rest of this war working together with this fellow here—since he doesn't talk a language, he doesn't have a verbal name. You won't have trouble conversing with him, however, because he knows what you think, and you will know what he thinks when he wants you to."

"Then they do read minds," Grey said.

"Sure. What of it? You can almost do it, yourself. Why do you think we picked you for this job? Out of the thousands that we test, a few here and there have the right kind of sensitivity. When the professors learn more about the science of psychomechanics maybe we'll learn how it works. Now all we know is that it works."

"What's wrong with them, then?" The question was involuntary, dropping suddenly from Grey's mouth. Confused by his own frankness, he stammered, "I—I mean, why don't people like them?"

"This is a question with many angles," the officer said, gravely. "It's an old story. We had barely obtained a world government when interstellar travel was on hand and we came into contact with strange types of intelligent beings. Man was still trying to overcome distrust between the slightly different groups within his own species. When he came to deal with species of such strange shapes and psychologies as those on the other planets, the distrust was intensified many times.

“Particularly, people fear the telepathic powers of the Canopans. They fear the mysterious and the supernatural. Telepathy still seems a supernatural thing to the ignorant and—I’m afraid—to some who are not so ignorant. People are afraid of their minds being invaded. Their sense of privacy is outraged.

“They cannot visualize the fact that the Canopans are completely uninterested in what thoughts a Terran may have. The Canopan psychology is sufficiently different from ours that our private thoughts may be interesting, perhaps curious, but never the sort of thing upon which they would put a moral judgment. Their sense of morality is too different from ours for moral judgments to have meaning.

“You may accept this intellectually at the moment without absorbing it into your system. In a short time you will really be convinced that this is so. In the meantime, the two of you must become friendly enough so that you can perform your jobs.”

GREY LOOKED from the officer to his Canopan partner, and clearly received the verification that all of this was really so. Inside Grey there was an impression of relief, a loosening of tensions.

From that moment on, Grey and Joe were inseparable. They lived together, ate together, and in their training they were as one mentality.

“Doggone if you wouldn’t think we were married,” Grey kept saying.

Surely the extreme rapport, and the warm feeling of relaxation and mental capability which Grey felt when in the presence of Joe, indicated an intimacy which was the equal of any physical attraction.

With the extreme complexity of the control and communication equipment in the great space vessels, there had arisen the need for something radically different in maintenance technicians. The delay of testing circuits for faults and breakdowns had to be eliminated. For this purpose the peculiarly suited Canopans had been brought to Earth by the thousands.

Even in the specialized branch of computing-machines to which Grey had been assigned, the magnitude of the knowledge to be absorbed in a few hasty months would ordinarily have made the task impossible. With the two nervous systems of

Grey and Joe acting as one, however, they were able to absorb huge chunks of knowledge at one gulp, assort it, store it away, and go on to the next item.

Carefully supervised by psychiatrists to ensure that no breakdowns would occur from overloading of nervous connections, Grey advanced from the status of an untrained youngster to that of a highly skilled electro-technician.

“Joe, with all the brains that you fellows have,” Grey remarked one day, “it’s a wonder that you haven’t advanced any farther than you have, as far as technical things are concerned. I don’t know why you need me around. You know all the stuff that I know, and maybe a lot more. Why don’t you Canopans just take over the whole works?”

“We’re really not very interested in electronics and such things,” Joe replied. “We put up with this as a rather unhappy necessity, but our creative instincts do not lie in that direction. Since we have developed without hands, and with a brain of capabilities which are strange to you, our culture has become more introspective—more interested in the being within than in the things without—more interested in creating things of beauty to perceive rather than machines of complexity for the control of nature.”

“Very pretty,” Grey sighed. “And just as well, for otherwise I would be out of a job.”

Even so, Grey felt little more useful than a soldering-iron or a screwdriver in the hands of a master mechanic. For Joe, with his ability to perceive without sight, with his capability of feeling the very electric currents flowing through a machine—he was the diagnostician, the one who squatted before a defunct piece of equipment and without hesitation unerringly decided what was wrong with it and directed Grey to the point where the repair had to be made. From that point on Grey wielded the tools.

But there was no room for false pride. The two of them together constituted a working team. The two of them made one mechanic.

In addition to learning the technical things required for maintenance of machinery, both Jed Grey and the Canopan had to learn many other things which inevitably went with their partnership.

They had to learn how it was to walk down a city street and feel the ebb and flow of thoughts about them—thoughts concerning the race of Canopans in general and concerning the type of

Terran who would walk down a street arm in arm with a Canopan.

They learned this quickly. Gradually the psychic hurts healed over and in their place was a hard defense-mechanism compounded of wisdom, mental toughness, and a contempt for the opinions of the others.

Actually, to Joe, the opinions of the Terrans were of no interest. But as he once remarked to Grey: "It's an impersonal sort of unpleasantness—like walking through a street filled with a bad odor, like walking through a room filled with buzz-saws. It jars the nerves."

Grey presently came to feel in the same manner.

"I'm not quite a Terran anymore," he said.

Joe assented. "You are a real cosmopolitan. You have the real interstellar attitude. In time everybody will see it that way."

TIME—TIME. It went so rapidly. It swept them along through the several stages of their training, and now it was their last night out before stepping into the great battlewagon for the final and irrevocable journey across space to the war, which up to now had been a hazy background to their work.

Elby Jones brought Grey another drink. "It's a good night here tonight."

"I'm glad it is," said Grey.

Yes, it had to be a good night, because the last one had to be good. There had to be that much to remember out there a thousand light-years away.

The music started once more, and it brought to Grey the thought that it was curious how the Canopans had taken to American Jazz and cigarettes and had intensified their effects to a degree previously unknown. What a group of characters they were. They could go on an intellectual jag from a Bach Fugue as quickly as they could go on a nicotine binge. Their entire psychology was geared to the obtaining of pleasure from sensations of many different kinds.

"The Terrans do likewise, you know," Joe transmitted to him.

Grey grinned back at Joe. You couldn't keep a stray thought-wave away from the guy.

"It's different the way you do it," he replied. "You don't get blind stinkin' drunk when you go on a jag. You do it for exhilaration, for an uplift."

"The process of getting stinking is . . ." Joe broke off suddenly.

Simultaneously, Grey could sense that the other Canopans had shifted their attentions, that the music, although it kept playing, echoed hollowly between the walls, unsupported by the listeners.

Grey caught the faint jar of a commotion outside the door. A roar of voices and heavy footsteps crescendoed suddenly as a mob in blue uniforms burst into the place. As it seemed to Grey in the first violent moment, each had a bottle in one hand and a brightly-painted female in the other. There seemed to be a squadron of them. It turned out, finally, that there were perhaps ten altogether.

From the insignia on their uniforms, Grey guessed that these were combat men on their way back from the battle sector, ready to tear up the first town that they hit on the first night out.

"Cripes! The place is full of snakes!" one of them shouted. "What're snakes doing here when there's some good ol' earthmen lookin' for a place to sit down?"

One of the girls pulled back. "Let's get out of here, Jack," she whispered, nervously. "I'm afraid of them snakes."

"They ain't gonna hurt you, honey," Jack told her, hoarsely. "I always wondered if them snakes grew together if you pulled them apart."

He walked a few paces inside the door. "If you snakes can read my mind, you know what I'm gonna do if you don't clear outta here pronto. An' readin' my mind ain't gonna help you against my good right arm."

GREY FELT SICK. A brawl on the last night . . . There was a stray thought in his mind that he and Joe would make a good fighting team if the two of them could coordinate fast enough.

"No," Joe's reply came to him instantly. "This isn't your fight. We'll handle this."

"The hell you say!" Grey attempted to stand—found himself limp as a rag. He could suddenly smell his own perspiration as he strained to move, and as he looked about the room he saw that the other Terrans at the tables were remaining there, their expressions startled and anxious.

The Canopans had risen, and were slowly making their way between the tables to the front of the room. The band was still playing a slightly mad background to the picture which consisted of the smoky room with the dim lights, the Terrans sitting paralyzed at their tables, the Canopans moving in on the Fleetmen at the door . . . who stared in

disbelief, began to swing their bottles, and collapsed quietly on the floor.

The girls, without time to shriek, collapsed just as quietly, and lay there in an unmoving heap.

Grey abruptly was stone cold sober. He wanted out, as fast as possible. The idea of going up for murder appealed to him not at all.

"Forget it," Joe flashed at him. "They're not dead. But we'll have to get rid of them. We'll be back in a minute."

The Canopans silently carried the bodies outside the door, leaving Grey sitting still at his table, performing a great quantity of furious thinking.

Joe was back quickly. He anticipated Grey's questions.

"They'll wake up, and they'll think somebody slipped them a Mickey. But they won't remember what happened."

He hesitated, sat down, and lit another smoke. "You're okay, now, by the way."

Grey tried, and found that the nervous impulses now went where they were supposed to go. He stood up, shakily. Then he sat down again. While he was searching for words to say something, Joe interrupted.

"Look," he transmitted. "This has to be kept undercover. Things are bad enough for us without this sort of thing getting around. I didn't even want you to know, but that couldn't be helped. I didn't feel like getting bashed."

Grey accepted another glass gratefully from Elby Jones.

"Sure," he said. "I don't talk to anybody, anyway. But you have to tell me. How much can you do?"

Joe considered for a moment before replying.

"I don't know, really. Terran nervous systems are not like ours. We have had only a short time to discover what we can do and what we can't do. We don't have real control—although there are certain possibilities with a modified hypnotic suggestion. At present we are only able to introduce resistances temporarily in certain nerve paths, so that inhibitions are produced."

"So for a while I was just inhibited against standing up, and they were inhibited against being conscious. It that it?"

"Approximately."

Grey sipped from his glass, peering over the edge of it at Joe. Precisely how much was there, he thought, hidden within the recesses of that brain?

Just how much did this innocent little character have on the ball?

JOE CHOSE this moment to become taciturn. The music was riding once more, and the place was settling down after the sudden disturbance. It took Jed Grey several more minutes and another glass to throw off the nervous tension which sat like a blanket over his shoulders. Gradually he began to relax, and the warm spot within his belly proceeded to creep up into his head.

"Tomorrow," he thought drowsily, "we will be taking off, and there will be no more of this. No more music except from cans. No more . . ."

Abruptly he realized that the rapport had been broken off again by the Canopans, and that at the other end of town there was the faint howl of the police siren.

"There's a brawl down the street," Joe informed Grey. "Some of our heroes back from the battle sector feel that they haven't had enough fighting."

"I bet you a pack of smokes that the guys in the fight haven't been within a light year of an actual battle," said Grey, dryly. "They're the ones who always try to make like tough heroes when they get back."

Through the Canopan's sense of perception Jed Grey could catch faint impulses of the tumult which filled the street a hundred yards away. There was a violence in the thoughts projected from that area which caused the colors of Joe's fur to shift erratically, nervously. In Grey they caused a tightening of the stomach and a heavy feeling in the chest.

"It hurts almost as much to listen in to a fight as it does to be right in the middle of it," he remarked. "Why don't you just shut it off if you can't take it?"

"As well try to shut off your sense of hearing," Joe snapped back.

The sirens down the street had wailed to a halt. Grey lit another cigarette and tried what was left in his glass. It was flat. The warm glow which had diffused through his body was gone, and in its place there was a bitter taste and a burning sensation around the eyes.

Abruptly he mashed out his cigarette and stood up.

"The night's washed up," he growled. "Let's get out of here."

Joe, with a thought of regret, assented, and the

two of them left.

It was bitter to end the last night upon such an uncompleted note.

THE TWO OF THEM strolled back in the direction of the bus station. The fresh night, bright with the blaze of stars and saloon signs, should have exhilarated them; but the mental tension which filled the street pressed hard on Joe's receptors, and, through him, against Grey.

A pair of police cars squatted at the corner. Fleet Police milled through the crowds, shock sticks in hand. An ambulance helicopter roaring in from the Fleet Base settled down in the center of the street.

The fight was over, but so keyed up were the Fleetmen in town that for Grey and the Canopan to walk through the street was to walk through a sticky, obscene glue of malevolence.

Joe's fur colors had faded to a dismal blue. Grey glanced at this with alarm.

The thoughts in the crowd around them had been impersonal ones—fight thoughts, pleasure thoughts, passion thoughts—violent and unnerving to the pair who had to thread their way through this tumult, but yet impersonal.

It began to change.

They began again with the snake thoughts and the thoughts about the Terran who walked with the damn snake. They looked at the pair who walked in their midst, and in their state of excitement with violence not yet out of their minds, there was a redirection of passion from the recent fight to the new center of attention.

Grey gasped as the force of this new agitation struck them.

The pair of Fleet Police ahead of them changed their direction of motion and started walking towards them. Grey's face twitched as he felt the increased tension within Joe's nervous system.

"Hold it, son," he cautioned. "Remember we're supposed to be tough. Remember the nerves of steel we're supposed to have, like it says in the books."

Joe's grip on Grey's arm tightened; and then relaxed.

"I thought I could take anything. Tonight has been almost too much."

The Fleet Police were directly in front of them. The one on the right pointed at Grey with his stick and began to say something.

The door of the adjacent saloon swung open and a giant of a bearded Fleetman roared out. The girl hanging to his arm caught a sudden sight of Joe, and a burst of fright exploded in her empty little head, shocking Joe with its intensity.

She screamed, "It's thinking about me!"

The big Fleetman clapped his hand to his hip. There was no gun bolstered there, but Joe reared back in a dismayed reflex . . . In the next moment the Fleetman slumped to the pavement, where he lay quite still.

That was all—for a moment.

The Fleet Police looked at Joe and they looked down at the Fleetman. Then they looked back at Joe. One of them stooped down and remained there for a long minute. He rose, and his face was white.

"The guy's dead," he said, and his shock stick came up, pointing at Joe. "You do that?" he snapped.

"He didn't touch the guy," Grey said.

"Maybe yes and maybe no. Guy's don't just drop and die. I think both of you'd better come."

AT THE FLEET POLICE headquarters the medic turned pale when he examined the body. A number of urgent calls were made. The Canopan liaison officer arrived after a nasty fifteen minutes during which the doctor and the Fleet Police Commandant argued violently and then stood staring blankly at the floor.

Grey's eyes widened when behind the Canopan there stalked not only the commanding officer of his ship, but the Commandant of the entire Fleet Base.

"The joint's lousy with brass tonight," he flashed silently at Joe as the two of them stood rigidly at attention. "I think you've become notorious."

He caught a sense of amusement from an undetermined source, and in a moment narrowed it down as coming from the Canopan liaison officer.

Good for our side, Grey thought in relief—at least Canopan officers kept their minds unbound by brass. They'd stand behind Joe.

The Fleet Base Commandant knifed Joe with a rigid stare. He spoke rapidly and bitingly. "It is difficult enough to keep harmony among the various planetary groups at the base without it becoming known that the Canopans can kill Terrans by their mental powers. You have been trained in self-control. By this incident tonight you

have jeopardized the morale of all the troops in the region.”

The Canopan officer put in gently, “This was clearly a case of self-defense. The Fleetman was drawing a gun.”

“Unfortunately for that argument,” stated the Commandant, “the Fleetman was not carrying a gun.”

“But this 34C could not see in the first instant. His attention was on the thoughts which the Fleetman transmitted at that moment. The Fleetman forgot he was not wearing a sidearm, and in his mind there was the distinct picture of drawing his gun and shooting 34C. To 34C this was the reality of the moment. In his extreme nervousness he misjudged the force needed, and projected a lethal thought.”

“A pretty legality,” the Base Commandant growled. “Is it self-defense when you kill a person for *thinking* that he is about to kill you?”

“I know nothing of your law,” the Canopan replied. “We have warned that an incident such as this was bound to occur sooner or later in the tense atmosphere of this town. May I suggest . . .”

“I know, I know.” The Commandant passed a hand through his hair in disgust. “Your ideas about orienting the entire fleet. Subconscious psychological training . . . still sounds like hypnotism to me. But if we must, then we must.”

“And you, Jeffreys.” He turned to Grey’s ship-

commander. “You’re taking off tomorrow. You wouldn’t want to lose a team, would you?”

“Certainly not, sir.” Grey caught the relief in the commander’s mind. “They’re a good team.”

“Then as far as anybody is concerned there has been no incident tonight.” The Commandant turned to the medic. “Get that?”

Commander Jeffreys motioned to Joe and Grey. “You two will return to the base with me.”

Grey nodded mutely and began to follow the commander out of the door, his attention focussed upon an idea which had sprung into his consciousness during the past minute.

“Look, Joe,” he thought. “If you can do that to a Terran, what could you do to one of the enemy?”

Joe began, “If I knew what the enemy was like . . .”

A blast of thought broke into their minds. It blazed a warning signal in vivid, incandescent pictures, and in roaring sound. It said, in numerous and tumultuous manners, Stop where you are—keep out—restricted, confidential, top-secret territory!

Grey jerked his head around. He stared for one astounded moment at the Canopan officer.

Then he was walking out to the waiting helicopter, the palm of his hand moist as he tightly held one of Joe’s tentacles.

The people who ran a war were not always the obvious ones, he thought.