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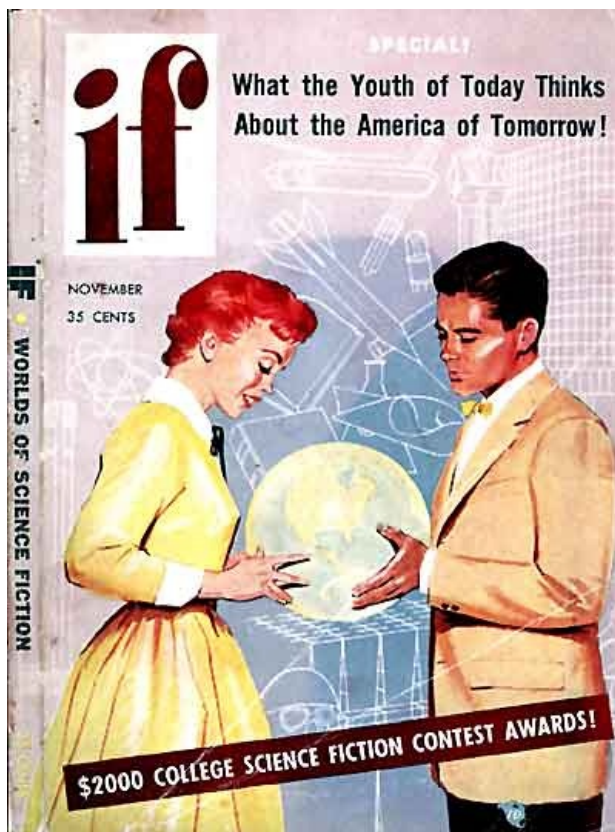
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VERY SECRET AGENT \*\*\*

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## THE VERY SECRET AGENT

BY MARI WOLF

Illustrated by Ed Emsch

*Poor Riuku!... Not being a member of the human race, how was he supposed to understand what goes on in a woman's mind when the male of the same species didn't even know?*

---

In their ship just beyond the orbit of Mars the two aliens sat looking at each other. "No," Riuku said. "I haven't had any luck. And I can tell you right now that I'm not going to have any, and no one else is going to have any either. The Earthmen are too well shielded."

"You contacted the factory?" Nagor asked.

"Easily. It's the right one. The parking lot attendant knows there's a new weapon being produced in there. The waitress at the Jumbo Burger Grill across the street knows it. Everybody I reached knows it. But not one knows anything about what it is."

Nagor looked out through the ports of the spaceship, which didn't in the least resemble an Earth spaceship, any more than what Nagor considered sight resembled the corresponding Earth sense perception. He frowned.

"What about the research scientists? We know who some of them are. The supervisors? The technicians?"

"No," Riuku said flatly. "They're shielded. Perfectly I can't make contact with a single mind down there that has the faintest inkling of what's going on. We never should have let them develop the shield."

"Have you tried contacting everyone? What about the workers?"

"Shielded. All ten thousand of them. Of course I haven't checked all of them yet, but—"

"Do it," Nagor said grimly. "We've got to find out what that weapon is. Or else get out of this solar system."

Riuku sighed. "I'll try," he said.

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Someone put another dollar in the juke box, and the theremins started in on Mare Indrium Mary for the tenth time since Pete Ganley had come into the bar. "Aw shut up," he said, wishing there was some way to turn them off. Twelve-ten. Alice got off work at Houston's at twelve. She ought to be here by now. She would be, if it weren't Thursday. Shield boosting night for her.

Why, he asked himself irritably, couldn't those scientists figure out some way to keep the shields up longer than a week? Or else why didn't they have boosting night the same for all departments? He had to stay late every Friday and Alice every Thursday, and all the time there was Susan at home ready to jump him if he wasn't in at a reasonable time....

"Surprised, Pete?" Alice Hendricks said at his elbow.

He swung about, grinned at her. "Am I? You said it. And here I was about to go. I never thought you'd make it before one." His grin faded a little. "How'd you do it? Sweet-talk one of the guards into letting you in at the head of the line?"

She shook her bandanaed head, slid onto the stool beside him and crossed her knees—a not very convincing sign of femininity in a woman wearing baggy denim coveralls. "Aren't you going to buy me a drink, honey?"

"Oh, sure." He glanced over at the bartender. "Another beer. No, make it two." He pulled the five dollars out of his pocket, shoved it across the bar, and looked back at Alice, more closely this time. The ID badge, pinned to her hip. The badge, with her name, number, department, and picture—and the little meter that measured the strength of her Mind Shield.

The dial should have pointed to full charge. It didn't. It registered about seventy per cent loss.

Alice followed his gaze. She giggled. "It was easy," she said. "The guards don't do more than glance at us, you know. And everyone who's supposed to go through Shielding on Thursday has the department number stamped on a yellow background. So all I did was make a red background, like yours, and slip it on in the restroom at Clean-up time."

"But Alice...." Pete Ganley swallowed his beer and signaled for another. "This is serious. You've got to keep the shields up. The enemy is everywhere. Why, right now, one could be probing you."

"So what? The dial isn't down to Danger yet. And tomorrow I'll just put the red tag back on over the yellow one and go through Shielding in the same line with you. They won't notice." She giggled again. "I thought it was smart, Petey. You oughta think so too. You know why I did it, don't you?"

Her round, smooth face looked up at him, wide-eyed and full-lipped. She had no worry wrinkles like Susan's, no mouth pulled down at the corners like Susan's, and under that shapeless coverall....

"Sure, baby, I'm glad you did it," Pete Ganley said huskily.

Riuku was glad too, the next afternoon when the swing shift started pouring through the gates.

It was easy, once he'd found her. He had tested hundreds, all shielded, some almost accessible to him, but none vulnerable enough. Then this one came. The shield was so far down that contact was almost easy. Painful, tiring, but not really difficult. He could feel her momentary sense of alarm, of nausea, and then he was through, integrated with her, his thoughts at home with her thoughts.

He rested, inside her mind.

"Oh, hi, Joan. No, I'm all right. Just a little dizzy for a moment. A hangover? Of course not. Not on a Friday."

Riuku listened to her half of the conversation. Stupid Earthman. If only she'd start thinking about the job. Or if only his contact with her were better. If he could use her sense perceptions, see through her eyes, hear through her ears, feel through her fingers, then everything would be easy. But he couldn't. All he could do was read her thoughts. Earth thoughts at that....

*... The time clock. Where's my card? Oh, here it is. Only 3:57. Why did I have to hurry so? I had lots of time....*

"Why, Mary, how nice you look today. That's a new hairdo, isn't it? A permanent? Yeah, what kind?" *... What a microbe! Looks like pink straw, her hair does, and of course she thinks it's beautiful....* "I'd better get down to my station. Old Liverlips will be ranting again. You oughta be glad you have Eddie for a lead man. Eddie's cute. So's Dave, over in 77. But Liverlips, ugh...."

She was walking down the aisle to her station now. A procession of names: *Maisie, and Edith, and that fat slob Natalie, and if Jean Andrews comes around tonight flashing that diamond in my face again, I'll—I'll kill her....*

"Oh hello, Clinton. What do you mean, late? The whistle just blew. Of course I'm ready to go to work." *Liverlips, that's what you are. And still in that same blue shirt. What a wife you must have. Probably as sloppy as you are....*

Good, Riuku thought. Now she'll be working. Now he'd find out whatever it was she was doing.

Not that it would be important, of course, but let him learn what her job was, and what those other girls' jobs were, and in a little while he'd have all the data he needed. Maybe even before the shift ended tonight, before she went through the Shielding boost.

He shivered a little, thinking of the boost. He'd survive it, of course. He'd be too well integrated with her by then. But it was nothing to look forward to.

Still, he needn't worry about it. He had the whole shift to find out what the weapon was. The whole shift, here inside Alice's mind, inside the most closely guarded factory on or under or above the surface of the Earth. He settled down and waited, expectantly.

Alice Hendricks turned her back on the lead man and looked down the work table to her place. The other girls were there already. Lois and Marge and Coralie, the other three members of the Plug table, Line 73.

"Hey, how'd you make out?" Marge said. She glanced around to make sure none of the lead men or timekeepers were close enough to overhear her, then went on. "Did you get away with it?"

"Sure," Alice said. "And you should of seen Pete's face when I walked in."

She took the soldering iron out of her locker, plugged it in, and reached out for the pan of 731 wires. "You know, it's funny. Pete's not so good looking, and he's sort of a careless dresser and all that, but oh, what he does to me." She filled the 731 plug with solder and reached for the white, black, red wire.

"You'd better watch out," Lois said. "Or Susan's going to be doing something to you."

"Oh, her." Alice touched the tip of the iron to the solder filled pin, worked the wire down into position. "What can she do? Pete doesn't give a damn about her."

"He's still living with her, isn't he?" Lois said.

Alice shrugged.... *What a mealy-mouthed little snip Lois could be, sometimes. You'd think to hear her that she was better than any of them, and luckier too, with her Joe and the kids. What a laugh! Joe was probably the only guy who'd ever looked at her, and she'd hooked him right out of school, and now with three kids in five years and her working nights....*

Alice finished soldering the first row of wires in the plug and started in on the second. So old Liverlips thought she wasted time, did he? Well, she'd show him. She'd get out her sixteen plugs tonight.

"Junior kept me up all night last night," Lois said. "He's cutting a tooth."

"Yeah," Coralie said, "It's pretty rough at that age. I remember right after Mike was born...."

Don't they ever think of anything but their kids? Alice thought. She stopped listening to them. She heard Pete's voice again, husky and sending little chills all through her, and his face came between her and the plug and the white green wire she was soldering. His face, with those blue eyes that went right through a girl and that little scar that quirked up the corner of his mouth....

"Oh, oh," Alice said suddenly. "I've got solder on the outside of the pin." She looked around for the alcohol.

Riuku probed. Her thoughts were easy enough to read, but just try to translate them into anything useful.... He probed deeper. The plugs she was soldering. He could get a good picture of them, of the wires, of the harness lacing that Coralie was doing. But it meant nothing. They could be making anything. Radios, monitor units, sound equipment.

Only they weren't. They were making a weapon, and this bit of electronic equipment was part of that weapon. What part? What did the 731 plug do?

Alice Hendricks didn't know. Alice Hendricks didn't care.

The first break. Ten minutes away from work. Alice was walking back along the aisle that separated Assembly from the men's Machine Shop. A chance, perhaps. She was looking at the machines, or rather past them, at the men.

"Hello, Tommy. How's the love life?" He's not bad at all. Real cute. Though not like Pete, oh no.

The machines. Riuku prodded at her thoughts, wishing he could influence them, wishing that just for a moment he could see, hear, feel, *think* as she would never think.

The machines were—machines. That big funny one where Ned works, and Tommy's spot welder, and over in the corner where the superintendent is—he's a snappy dresser, tie and everything.

The corner. Restricted area. Can't go over. High voltage or something....

Her thoughts slid away from the restricted area. Should she go out for lunch or eat off the sandwich machine? And Riuku curled inside her mind and cursed her with his rapidly growing Earthwoman's vocabulary.

At the end of the shift he had learned nothing. Nothing about the weapon, that is. He had found out a good deal about the sex life of Genus Homo—information that made him even more glad than before that his was a one-sexed race.

With work over and tools put away and Alice in the restroom gleefully thinking about the red Friday night tag she was slipping onto her ID badge, he was as far from success as ever. For a moment he considered leaving her, looking for another subject. But he'd probably not be able to find one. No, the only thing to do was stay with her, curl deep in her mind and go through the Shielding boost, and later on....

The line. Alice's nervousness.... *Oh, oh, there's that guy with the meter—the one from maintenance. What's he want?*

"Whaddya mean, my shield's low? How could it be?" ... *If he checks the tag I'll be fired for sure. It's a lot of nonsense anyway. The enemy is everywhere, they keep telling us. Whoever saw one of them?*" "No, honest, I didn't notice anything. Can I help it if.... It's okay, huh? It'll pass...."

Down to fifteen per cent, the guy said. Well, that's safe, I guess. Whew.

"Oh, hello, Paula. Whatcha talking about, what am I doing here tonight? Shut up...."

And then, in the midst of her thoughts, the pain, driving deep into Riuku, twisting at him, wrenching at him, until there was no consciousness of anything at all.

He struggled back. He was confused, and there was blankness around him, and for a moment he thought he'd lost contact altogether. Then he came into focus again. Alice's thoughts were clearer than ever suddenly. He could feel her emotions; they were a part of him now. He smiled. The Shielding boost had helped him. Integration—much more complete integration than he had ever known before.

"But Pete, honey," Alice said. "What did you come over to the gate for? You shouldn't of done it."

"Why not? I wanted to see you."

"What if one of Susan's pals sees us?"

"So what? I'm getting tired of checking in every night, like a baby. Besides, one of her pals did see us, last night, at the bar."

*Fear. What'll she do? Susan's a hellcat. I know she is. But maybe Pete'll get really sick and tired of her. He looks it. He looks mad. I'd sure hate to have him mad at me....*

"Let's go for a spin, baby. Out in the suburbs somewhere. How about it?"

"Well—why sure, Pete...."

Sitting beside him in the copter. *All alone up here. Real romantic, like something on the video. But I shouldn't with him married, and all that. It's not right. But it's different, with Susan such a mean thing. Poor Petey....*

Riuku prodded. He found it so much easier since the Shielding boost. If only these Earthmen were more telepathic, so that they could be controlled directly. Still, perhaps with this new integration he could accomplish the same results. He prodded again.

"Pete," Alice said suddenly. "What are we working on, anyway?"

"What do you mean, working on?" He frowned at her.

"At the plant. All I ever do is sit there soldering plugs, and no one ever tells me what for."

"Course not. You're not supposed to talk about any part of the job except your own. You know that. The slip of a lip—"

"Can cost Earth a ship. I know. Quit spouting poster talk at me, Pete Ganley. The enemy isn't even human. And there aren't any around here."

Pete looked over at her. She was pouting, the upper lip drawn under the lower. Someone must have told her that was cute. Well, so what—it was cute.

"What makes you think I know anything more than you do?" he said.

"Well, gee." She looked up at him, so near to her in the moonlight that she wondered why she wanted to talk about the plant anyway. "You're in Final Assembly, aren't you? You check the whatsits before they go out."

"Sure," he said. No harm in telling her. No spies now, not in this kind of war. Besides, she was too dumb to know anything.

"It's a simple enough gadget," Pete Ganley said. "A new type of force field weapon that the enemy can't spot until it hits them. They don't even know there's an Earth ship within a million miles, until *Bingo!*..."

She drank it in, and in her mind Riuku did too. Wonderful integration, wonderful. Partial thought control. And now, he'd learn the secret....

"You really want to know how it works?" Pete Ganley said. When she nodded he couldn't help grinning. "Well, it's analogous to the field set up by animal neurones, in a way. You've just got to

damp that field, and not only damp it but blot it out, so that the frequency shows nothing at all there, and then—well, that's where those Corcoran assemblies you're soldering on come in. You produce the field...."

Alice Hendricks listened. For some reason she wanted to listen. She was really curious about the field. But, gee, how did he expect her to understand all that stuff? He sounded like her algebra teacher, or was it chemistry? Lord, how she'd hated school. Maybe she shouldn't have quit.

*... Corcoran fields. E and IR and nine-space something or other. She'd never seen Pete like this before. He looked real different. Sort of like a professor, or something. He must be real smart. And so—well, not good-looking especially but, well, appealing. Real SA, he had....*

"So that's how it works," Pete Ganley said. "Quite a weapon, against them. It wouldn't work on a human being, of course." She was staring at him dreamy-eyed. He laughed. "Silly, I bet you haven't understood a word I said."

"I have too."

"Liar." He locked the automatic pilot on the copter and held out his arms. "Come here, you."

"Oh, Petey...."

Who cared about the weapon? He was right, even if she wouldn't admit it. She hadn't even listened, hardly. She hadn't understood.

And neither had Riuku.

---

**R**iuku waited until she'd fallen soundly asleep that night before he tried contacting Nagor. He'd learned nothing useful. He'd picked up nothing in her mind except more thoughts of Pete, and gee, maybe someday they'd get married, if he only had guts enough to tell Susan where to get off....

But she was asleep at last. Riuku was free enough of her thoughts to break contact, partially of course, since if he broke it completely he wouldn't be able to get back through the Shielding. It was hard enough to reach out through it. He sent a painful probing feeler out into space, to the spot where Nagor and the others waited for his report.

"Nagor...."

"Riuku? Is that you?"

"Yes. I've got a contact. A girl. But I haven't learned anything yet that can help us."

"Louder, Riuku. I can hardly hear you...."

Alice Hendricks stirred in her sleep. The dream images slipped through her subconscious, almost waking her, beating against Riuku.

Pete, baby, you shouldn't be like that....

Riuku cursed the bisexual species in their own language.

"Riuku!" Nagor's call was harsh, urgent. "You've got to find out. We haven't much time. We lost three more ships today, and there wasn't a sign of danger. No Earthman nearby, no force fields, nothing. You've got to find out why." Those ships just disappeared.

Riuku forced his way up through the erotic dreams of Alice Hendricks. "I know a little," he said. "They damp their thought waves somehow, and keep us from spotting the Corcoran field."

"Corcoran field? What's that?"

"I don't know." Alice's thoughts washed over him, pulling him back into complete integration, away from Nagor, into a medley of heroic Petes with gleaming eyes and clutching hands and good little Alices pushing them away—for the moment.

"But surely you can find out through the girl," Nagor insisted from far away, almost out of phase altogether.

"No, Pete!" Alice Hendricks said aloud.

"Riuku, you're the only one of us with any possible sort of contact. You've got to find out, if we're to stay here at all."

"Well," Alice Hendricks thought, "maybe...."

Riuku cursed her again, in the lingua franca of a dozen systems. Nagor's voice faded. Riuku switched back to English.

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aturday. Into the plant at 3:58. Jean's diamond again.... *Wish it would choke her; she's got a*

**S**horsey enough face for it to. Where's old Liverlips? Don't see him around. Might as well go to the restroom for a while....

That's it, Riuku thought. Get her over past the machine shop, over by that Restricted Area. There must be something there we can go on....

"Hello, Tommy," Alice Hendricks said. "How's the love life?"

"It could be better if someone I know would, uh, cooperate...."

She looked past him, toward the corner where the big panels were with all the dials and the meters and the chart that was almost like the kind they drew pictures of earthquakes on. What was it for, anyway? And why couldn't anyone go over to it except those longhairs? High voltage her foot....

"What're you looking at, Alice?" Tommy said.

"Oh, that." She pointed. "Wonder what it's for? It doesn't look like much of anything, really."

"I wouldn't know. I've got something better to look at."

"Oh, *you!*"

Compared to Pete, he didn't have anything, not anything at all.

*... Pete. Gee, he must have got home awful late last night. Wonder what Susan said to him. Why does he keep taking her lip, anyway?*

Riuku waited. He prodded. He understood the Restricted Area as she understood it—which was not at all. He found out some things about the 731 plugs—that a lot of them were real crummy ones the fool day shift girls had set up wrong, and besides she'd rather solder on the 717's any day. He got her talking about the weapon again, and he found out what the other girls thought about it.

Nothing.

Except where else could you get twelve-fifty an hour soldering?

She was stretched out on the couch in the restroom lobby taking a short nap—on company time, old Liverlips being tied up with the new girls down at the other end of the line—when Riuku finally managed to call Nagor again.

"Have you found out anything, Riuku?"

"Not yet."

Silence. Then: "We've lost another ship. Maybe you'd better turn her loose and come on back. It looks as if we'll have to run for it, after all."

Defeat. The long, interstellar search for another race, a race less technologically advanced than this one, and all because of a stupid Earth female.

"Not yet, Nagor," he said. "Her boy friend knows. I'll find out. I'll make her listen to him."

"Well," Nagor said doubtfully. "All right. But hurry. We haven't much time at all."

"I'll hurry," Riuku promised. "I'll be back with you tonight."

That night after work Pete Ganley was waiting outside the gate again. Alice spotted his copter right away, even though he had the lights turned way down.

"Gee, Pete, I didn't think...."

"Get in. Quick."

"What's the matter?" She climbed in beside him. He didn't answer until the copter had lifted itself into the air, away from the factory landing lots and the bright overhead lights and the home-bound workers.

"It's Susan, who else," he said grimly. "She was really sounding off today. She kept saying she had a lot of evidence and I'd better be careful. And, well, I sure didn't want you turning up at the bar tonight of all nights."

He didn't sound like Pete.

"Why?" Alice said. "Are you afraid she'll divorce you?"

"Oh, Alice, you're as bad as—look, baby, don't you see? It would be awful for you. All the publicity, the things she'd call you, maybe even in the papers...."

He was staring straight ahead, his hands locked about the controls. He was sort of—well, distant. Not her Petey any more. Someone else's Pete. Susan's Pete....

"I think we should be more careful," he said.

Riuku twisted his way through her thoughts, tried to push them down.... *Does he love me, he's*

*got to love me, sure he does, he just doesn't want me to get hurt....*

And far away, almost completely out of phase, Nagor's call. "Riuku, another ship's gone. You'd better come back. Bring what you've learned so far and we can withdraw from the system and maybe piece it together...."

"In a little while. Just a little while." Stop thinking about Susan, you biological schizo. Change the subject. You'll never get anything out of that man by having hysterics....

"I suppose," Alice cried bitterly, "you've been leading me on all the time. You don't love me. You'd rather have *her!*"

"That's not so. Hell, baby...."

*He's angry. He's not even going to kiss me. I'm just cutting my own throat when I act like that....*

"Okay, Pete. I'm sorry. I know it's tough on you. Let's have a drink, okay? Still got some in the glove compartment?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

She poured two drinks, neat, and he swallowed his with one impatient gulp. She poured him another.

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**R**iuku prodded. The drink made his job easier. Alice's thoughts calmed, swirled away from Susan and what am I going to do and why didn't I pick up with some single guy, anyway? A single guy, like Tommy maybe. Tommy and his spot welder, over there by the Restricted Area. The Restricted Area....

"Pete."

"Yeah, baby?"

"How come they let so much voltage loose in the plant, so we can't even go over in the Restricted Area?"

"Whatever made you think of that?" He laughed suddenly. He turned to her, still laughing. He was the old Pete again, she thought, with his face happy and his mouth quirked up at the corner. "Voltage loose ... oh, baby, baby. Don't you know what that is?"

"No. What?"

"That's the control panel for one of the weapons, silly. It's only a duplicate, actually—a monitor station. But it's tuned to the frequencies of all the ships in this sector and—"

She listened. She wanted to listen. She had to want to listen, now.

"Nagor, I'm getting it," Riuku called. "I'll bring it all back with me. Just a minute and I'll have it."

"How does it work, honey?" Alice Hendricks said.

"You really want to know? Okay. Now the Corcoran field is generated between the ships and areas like that one, only a lot more powerful, by—"

"It's coming through now, Nagor."

"—a very simple power source, once you get the basics of it. You—oh, oh!" He grabbed her arm. "Duck, Alice!"

A spotlight flashed out of the darkness, turned on them, outlined them. A siren whirred briefly, and then another copter pulled up beside them and a loudspeaker blared tinnily.

"Okay, bud, pull down to the landing lane."

The police.

Police. Fear, all the way through Alice's thoughts, all the way through Riuku. Police. Earth law. That meant—it must mean he'd been discovered, that they had some other means of protection besides the Shielding....

"Nagor! I've been discovered!"

"Come away then, you fool!"

He twisted, trying to pull free of Alice's fear, away from the integration of their separate terrors. But he couldn't push her thoughts back from his. She was too frightened. He was too frightened. The bond held.

"Oh, Pete, Pete, what did you do?"

He didn't answer. He landed the copter, stepped out of it, walked back to the other copter that was just dropping down behind him. "But officer, what's the matter?"



Alice Hendricks huddled down in the seat, already seeing tomorrow's papers, and her picture, and she wasn't really photogenic, either.... And then, from the other copter, she heard the woman laugh.

"Pete Ganley, you fall for anything, don't you?"

"Susan!"

"You didn't expect me to follow you, did you? Didn't it ever occur to you that detectives could put a bug in your copter? My, what we've been hearing!"

"Yeah," the detective who was driving said. "And those pictures we took last night weren't bad either."

"Susan, I can explain everything...."

"I'm sure you can, Pete. You always try. But as for you—you little—"

Alice ducked down away from her. Pictures. Oh God, what it would make her look like. Still, this hag with the pinched up face who couldn't hold a man with all the cosmetics in the drugstore to camouflage her—she had her nerve, yelling like that.

"Yeah, and I know a lot about you too!" Alice Hendricks cried.

"Why, let me get my hands on you...."

"Riuku!"

Riuku prodded. Calm down, you fool. You're not gaining anything this way. Calm down, so I can get out of here....

Alice Hendricks stopped yelling abruptly.

"That's better," Susan said. "Pete, your taste in women gets worse each time. I don't know why I always take you back."

"I can explain everything."

"Oh, Pete," Alice Hendricks whispered. "Petey, you're not—"

"Sure he is," Susan Ganley said. "He's coming with me. The nice detectives will take you home, dear. But I don't think you'd better try anything with them—they're not your type. They're single."

"Pete...." But he wouldn't meet Alice's eyes. And when Susan took his arm, he followed her.

"How could you do it, Petey...." Numb whispers, numb thoughts, over and over, but no longer frightened, no longer binding on Riuku.

Fools, he thought. Idiotic Earthmen. If it weren't for your ridiculous reproductive habits I'd have found out everything. As it is.... "Nagor, I'm coming! I didn't get anything. This woman—"

"Well, come on then. We're leaving. Right now. There'll be other systems."

*Petey, Petey, Petey....*

Contact thinned as he reached out away from her, toward Nagor, toward the ship. He fought his way out through the Shielding, away from her and her thoughts and every detestable thing about her. Break free, break free....

"What's the matter, Riuku? Why don't you come? Have the police caught you?"

The others were fleeing, getting farther away even as he listened to Nagor's call. Contact was hard to maintain now; he could feel communication fading.

"Riuku, if you don't come now...."

He fought, but Alice's thoughts were still with him; Alice's tears still kept bringing him back into full awareness of her.

"Riuku!"

"I—I can't!"

The Shielding boost, that had integrated him so completely with Alice Hendricks, would never let him go.

"Oh, Petey, I've lost you...."

And Nagor's sad farewell slipped completely out of phase, leaving him alone, with her.

The plant. The Restricted Area. The useless secret of Earth's now unneeded weapon. Alice Hendricks glancing past it, at the spot welding machine, at Tommy.

"How's the love life?"

"You really interested in finding out, Alice?"

"Well—maybe—"

And Riuku gibbered unheard in her mind.

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