

THE DEFIANT AGENTS

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CruGuru

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	9
CHAPTER 3	17
CHAPTER 4	25
CHAPTER 5	33
CHAPTER 6	41
CHAPTER 7	49
CHAPTER 8	57
CHAPTER 9	65
CHAPTER 10	75
CHAPTER 11	83
CHAPTER 12	91
CHAPTER 13	99
CHAPTER 14	107
CHAPTER 15	115
CHAPTER 16	123
CHAPTER 17	131
CHAPTER 18	139

CHAPTER 1

No windows broke the four plain walls of the office; no sunlight shone on the desk there. Yet the five disks set out on its surface appeared to glow--perhaps the heat of the mischief they could cause... had caused... blazed in them.

But fanciful imaginings did not change cold, hard fact. Dr. Gordon Ashe, one of the four men peering unhappily at the display, shook his head slightly as if to free his mind of such cobwebs.

His neighbor to the right, Colonel Kelgarries, leaned forward to ask harshly: "No chance of a mistake?"

"You saw the detector." The thin gray man behind the desk answered with chill precision. "No, no possible mistake. These five have definitely been snooped."

"And two choices among them," Ashe murmured. That was the important point now.

"I thought these were under maximum security," Kelgarries challenged the gray man.

Florian Waldour's remote expression did not change. "Every possible precaution was in force. There was a sleeper--a hidden agent--planted--"

"Who?" Kelgarries demanded.

Ashe glanced around at his three companions--Kelgarries, colonel in command of one sector of Project Star, Florian Waldour, the security head on the station, Dr. James Ruthven...

"Camdon!" he said, hardly able to believe this answer to which logic had led him.

Waldour nodded.

It was the first time since he had known and worked with Kelgarries that Ashe saw him display open astonishment.

"Camdon? But he was sent by--" The colonel's eyes narrowed. "He must have been sent... There were too many cross checks to fake that!"

"Oh, he was sent, all right." For the first time there was a note of emotion in Waldour's voice. "He was a sleeper, a very deep sleeper. They must have planted him a full twenty-five or thirty years ago. He's been just what he claimed to be as long as that."

"Well, he certainly was worth their time and trouble, wasn't he?" James Ruthven's voice was a growling rumble. He sucked in thick lips, continuing to stare at the disks. "How long ago were these snooped?"

Ashe's thoughts turned swiftly from the enormity of the betrayal to that important point. The time element--that was the primary concern now that the damage was done, and they knew it.

"That's one thing we don't know." Waldour's reply came slowly as if he hated the admission.

"We'll be safer, then, if we presume the very earliest period." Ruthven's statement was as ruthless in its implications as the shock they had had when Waldour announced the disaster.

"Eighteen months ago?" Ashe protested.

But Ruthven was nodding. "Camdon was in on this from the very first. We've had the tapes in and out for study all that time, and the new detector against snooping was not put in service until two weeks ago. This case came up on the first check, didn't it?" he asked Waldour.

"First check," the security man agreed. "Camdon left the base six days ago. But he has been in and out on his liaison duties from the first."

"He had to go through those search points every time," Kelgarries protested. "Thought nothing could get through those." The colonel brightened. "Maybe he got his snooper films and then couldn't take them off base. Have his quarters been turned out?"

Waldour's lips lifted in a grimace of exasperation. "Please, Colonel," he said wearily, "this is not a kindergarten exercise. In confirmation of his success, listen..." He touched a button on his desk and out of the air came the emotionless chant of a newscaster.

"Fears for the safety of Lassiter Camdon, space expeditor for the Western Alliance Space Council, have been confirmed by the discovery of burned wreckage in the mountains. Mr. Camdon was returning from a mission to the Star Laboratory when his plane lost contact with Ragnor Field. Reports of a storm in that vicinity immediately raised concern--" Waldour snapped off the voice.

"True--or a cover for his escape?" Kelgarries wondered aloud.

"Could be either. They may have deliberately written him off when they had all they wanted," Waldour acknowledged. "But to get back to our troubles--Dr. Ruthven is right to assume the worst. I believe we can only insure the recovery of our project by thinking that these tapes were snooped anywhere from eighteen months ago to last week. And we must work accordingly!"

The room fell silent as they all considered that. Ashe slipped down in his chair, his thoughts enmeshed in memories. First there had been Operation Retrograde, when specially trained "time agents" had shuttled back and forth in history, striving to locate and track down the mysterious source of alien knowledge which Greater Russia had suddenly--and ominously--began to use.

Ashe himself and a younger partner, Ross Murdock, had been part of the final action which had solved the mystery, having traced that source of knowledge not to an earlier and forgotten human civilization but to wrecked spaceships from an eon-old galactic empire--an empire which had flourished when glacial ice covered most of Europe and northern America and humans were cave-dwelling primitives. Murdock, trapped by the Russians in one of those wrecked ships, had inadvertently summoned its original owners. They had descended to trace--through the Russian time stations--the looters of their wrecks, destroying the whole Russian time-travel system.

But the aliens had not chanced on the parallel western system. And a year later that had been put into Project Folsom One. Again Ashe, Murdock, and a newcomer, the Apache Travis Fox, had gone back into time to the Arizona of the Folsom hunters, discovering what they wanted--two ships, one wrecked, the other intact. And when the project had attempted to bring the intact ship back into the present, chance had triggered controls set by the dead alien commander. A party of four, Ashe, Murdock, Fox, and a technician, had then made an involuntary space voyage, touching three worlds on which the galactic civilization of the far past had left ruins.

Voyage tape fed into the controls of the ship had taken the men, and, when rewound, it had almost miraculously returned them to Earth with a cargo of similar tapes found on a world which might have been the

capital for a government comprised of whole solar systems. Tapes--each one was the key to another planet.

And that ancient galactic knowledge was treasure such as humans had never dreamed of possessing, though many rightly feared that such discoveries could be weapons in hostile hands. Tapes chosen at random had been shared with other nations at a great drawing. But each nation secretly remained convinced that, in spite of the untold riches it might hold as a result of chance, its rivals had done better. Right at this moment, Ashe knew there were Western agents trying to do at the Russian project just what Camdon had done there. However, that did not help in solving their present dilemma about Operation Cochise, now perhaps the most important part of their plan.

Some of the tapes were duds, either too damaged to be useful, or set for worlds hostile to humans lacking the special equipment the earlier star-traveling race had had at its command. Of the five tapes they now knew had been snooped, three would be useless to the enemy.

But one of the remaining two... Ashe frowned. One was the goal toward which they had been working feverishly for a full twelve months. Their assignment was to plant a colony across the gulf of space--a successful colony--later to be used as a steppingstone to other worlds...

"So we have to move faster." Ruthven's comment reached Ashe through his stream of memories.

"I thought you required at least three more months to conclude personnel training," Waldour observed.

Ruthven lifted a fat hand, running the nail of a broad thumb back and forth across his lower lip in a habitual gesture Ashe had learned to mistrust. As the latter stiffened, bracing for a battle of wills, he saw Kelgarries come alert too. At least the colonel more often than not was able to counter Ruthven's demands.

"We test and we test," said the fat man. "Always we test. We move like turtles when it would be better to race like greyhounds. There is such a thing as overcaution, as I have said from the first. One would think"--his accusing glance included Ashe and Kelgarries--"that there had never been any improvising in this project, that all had always been done by the book. I say that this is the time we must take the big gamble, or else we may find we have been outbid for space entirely. Let those others discover even one alien installation they can master and--" his thumb shifted from his lip, grinding down on the desk top as if it were crushing some venturesome but entirely unimportant insect--"and we are finished before we really begin."

There were a number of men in the project who would agree with that, Ashe knew. And a greater number in the country and Alliance at

large. The public was used to reckless gambles which paid off, and there had been enough of those in the past to give an impressive argument for that point of view. But Ashe, himself, could not agree to a speed-up. He had been out among the stars, shaved disaster too closely because the proper training had not been given.

"I shall report that I advise a take-off within a week," Ruthven was continuing. "To the council I shall say that--"

"And I do not agree!" Ashe cut in. He glanced at Kelgarries for the quick backing he expected, but instead there was a lengthening moment of silence. Then the colonel spread out his hands and said sullenly:

"I don't agree either, but I don't have the final say-so. Ashe, what would be needed to speed up any take-off?"

It was Ruthven who replied. "We can use the Redax, as I have said from the start."

Ashe straightened, his mouth tight, his eyes hard and angry.

"And I'll protest that... to the council! Man, we're dealing with human beings--selected volunteers, men who trust us--not with laboratory animals!"

Ruthven's thick lips pouted into what was close to a smile of derision. "Always the sentimentalists, you experts in the past! Tell me, Dr. Ashe, were you always so thoughtful of your men when you sent agents back into time? And certainly a voyage into space is less risky than time travel. These volunteers know what they have signed for. They will be ready--"

"Then you propose telling them about the use of Redax--what it does to a man's mind?" countered Ashe.

"Certainly. They will receive all necessary instructions."

Ashe was not satisfied. He would have spoken again, except that Kelgarries interrupted:

"If it comes to that, none of us here has any right to make final decisions. Waldour has already sent in his report about the snoop. We'll have to await orders from the council."

Ruthven levered himself out of his chair, his solid bulk stretching his uniform coveralls. "That is correct, Colonel. In the meantime I would suggest we all check to see what can be done to speed up each one's portion of labor." Without another word, he tramped to the door.

Waldour eyed the other two with mounting impatience. It was plain he had work to do and wanted them to leave. But Ashe was reluctant. He had a feeling that matters were slipping out of his control, that he was about to face a crisis which was somehow worse than just a major security leak. Was the enemy always on the other side of the world? Or could he wear the same uniform, even pretend to share the same goals?

In the outer corridor he still hesitated. Kelgarries, a step or so in advance, looked back over his shoulder impatiently.

"There's no use fighting--our hands are tied." His words were slurred, almost as if he wanted to disown them.

"Then you'll agree to use the Redax?" For the second time within the hour Ashe felt as if he had taken a step only to have firm earth turn into slippery, shifting sand underfoot.

"It isn't a matter of my agreeing. It may be a matter of getting through or not getting through--now. If they've had eighteen months, or even twelve... !" The colonel's fingers balled into a fist. "And they won't be delayed by any humanitarian reasoning--"

"Then you believe Ruthven will win the council's approval?"

"When you are dealing with frightened men, you're talking to ears closed to anything except what they want to hear. After all, we can't prove that the Redax will be harmful."

"But we've only used it under rigidly controlled conditions. To speed up the process would mean a total disregard of those controls. Snapping a party of men and women back into their racial past and holding them there for too long a period..." Ashe shook his head.

"You have been in Operation Retrograde from the start, and we've been remarkably successful--"

"Operating in a different way, educating picked men to return to certain points in history where their particular temperaments and characteristics fitted the roles they were selected to play, yes. And even then we had our percentage of failures. But to try this--returning people not physically into time, but mentally and emotionally into prototypes of their ancestors--that's something else again. The Apaches have volunteered, and they've been passed by the psychologists and the testers. But they're Americans of today, not tribal nomads of two or three hundred years ago. If you break down some barriers, you might just end up breaking them all."

Kelgarries was scowling. "You mean--they might revert utterly, have no contact with the present at all?"

"That's just what I do mean. Education and training, yes, but full awakening of racial memories, no. The two branches of conditioning should go slowly and hand in hand, otherwise--real trouble!"

"Only we no longer have the time to go slow. I'm certain Ruthven will be able to push this through--with Waldour's report to back him."

"Then we'll have to warn Fox and the rest. They must be given a choice in the matter."

"Ruthven said that would be done." The colonel did not sound convinced.

Ashe snorted. "If I hear him telling them, I'll believe it!"

"I wonder whether we can..."

Ashe half turned and frowned at the colonel. "What do you mean?"

"You said yourself that we had our failures in time travel. We expected those, accepted them, even when they hurt. When we asked for volunteers for this project we had to make them understand that there was a heavy element of risk involved. Three teams of recruits--the Eskimos from Point Barren, the Apaches, and the Islanders--all picked because their people had a high survival rating in the past, to be colonists on widely different types of planets. Well, the Eskimos and the Islanders aren't matched to any of the worlds on those snooped tapes, but Topaz is waiting for the Apaches. And we may have to move them there in a hurry. It's a rotten gamble any way you see it!"

"I'll appeal directly to the council."

Kelgarries shrugged. "All right. You have my backing."

"But you believe such an effort hopeless?"

"You know the red-tape merchants. You'll have to move fast if you want to beat Ruthven. He's probably on a direct line now to Stanton, Reese, and Margate. This is what he has been waiting for!"

But if we contacted the media, public opinion would back us--"

"You don't mean that, of course." Kelgarries was suddenly coldly remote.

Ashe flushed under the heavy brown which overlay his regular features. To threaten a silence break was near blasphemy here. He ran both hands down the fabric covering his thighs as if to rub away some soil on his palms.

"No," he replied heavily, his voice dull. "I guess I don't. I'll contact Hough and hope for the best."

"Meanwhile," Kelgarries spoke briskly, "we'll do what we can to speed up the program as it now stands. I suggest you take off for New York within the hour--"

"Me? Why?" Ashe asked with a trace of suspicion.

"Because I can't leave without acting directly against orders, and that would put us wrong immediately. You see Hough and talk to him personally--put it to him straight. He'll have to have all the facts if he's going to counter any move from Stanton before the council. You know every argument we can use and all the proof on our side, and you're authority enough to make it count."

"If I can do all that, I will." Ashe was alert and eager. The colonel, seeing his change of expression, felt easier.

But Kelgarries stood a moment watching Ashe as he hurried down a side corridor, before he moved on slowly to his own box of an office. Once

inside he sat for a long time staring at the wall and seeing nothing but the pictures produced by his thoughts. Then he pressed a button and read off the symbols which flashed on a small viewscreen set in his desk. Punching a code, he relayed an order which might postpone trouble for a while. Ashe was far too valuable a man to lose, and his emotions could boil him straight into disaster over this.

"Bidwell--reschedule Team A. They are to go to the Hypno-Lab instead of the reserve in ten minutes."

Releasing the mike, he again stared at the wall. No one dared interrupt a hypno-training period, and this one would last three hours. Ashe could not possibly see the trainees before he left for New York. And that would remove one temptation from his path--he would not talk at the wrong time.

Kelgarries' mouth twisted sourly. He took no pride in what he was doing. And he was perfectly certain that Ruthven would win and that Ashe's fears of Redax were well founded. It all came back to the old basic tenet of the service: the end justified the means. They must use every method and man under their control to make sure that Topaz would remain a Western possession, even though that strange planet now swung far beyond the sky which covered both Western Alliance and Greater Russia. Time had run out too fast; they were being forced to play what cards they held, even though those might be low ones. Ashe would be back, but not, Kelgarries hoped, until this had been decided one way or another. Not until this was finished.

Finished! Kelgarries blinked at the wall. Perhaps they were finished, too. No one would know until the transport ship landed on that other world, that jewellike disk of gold-brown they had named Topaz.

CHAPTER 2

There were an even dozen of the air-borne guardians. Each swung in its own orbit just beyond the atmosphere of a bronze-gold planet in the four-world system of a yellow star. The globes had been launched to form a protective web around Topaz six months earlier. Just as contact mines sown in a harbor could close that landfall to ships not knowing the secret channel, so was this world supposedly closed to any spaceship lacking the signal to ward off the missiles the spheres could summon. This system for protecting the new human settlers had been tested as well as possible, but not as yet put to the ultimate proof. Still, the small bright globes spun undisturbed across a two-mooned sky at night and made reassuring blips on an installation screen by day.

Then a thirteenth object winked into being and began the encircling, closing spiral of descent. A sphere resembling the warden-globes, it was a hundred times their size, and its orbit was controlled by instruments under the eye and hand of a human pilot.

Four men were strapped down on cushioned sling-seats in the control cabin of the Western Alliance ship, two hanging where their fingers might reach buttons and levers. The two others were merely passengers, their own labor waiting for the time when they would set down on the alien soil of Topaz. The planet hung there in their viewscreen, richly beautiful in its amber gold, growing larger, nearer, so that they could

pick out features of seas, continents, mountain ranges, which had been studied on tape until they were familiar--or as familiar as a world not Earth could be.

One of the warden-globes came alert and oscillated in its set path. It whirled faster as its delicate interior mechanisms responded to the signal that would send it on its mission of destruction. A relay clicked, but imperceptibly slow in setting the proper course. On the instrument, far below, which checked the globe's new course the mistake was not noted.

The screen of the ship spiraling toward Topaz registered a path which would bring it into violent contact with the globe. They were still some hundreds of miles apart when the alarm rang. The pilot's hand clawed out at the bank of controls; under the almost intolerable pressure of their descent, there was so little he could do. His crooked fingers fell back powerlessly from the buttons and levers; his mouth was a twisted grimace of bleak acceptance as the beat of the signal increased.

One of the passengers forced his head around on the padded rest, fought to form words, to speak to his companion. The other was staring ahead at the screen, his thick lips wide and flat against his teeth in a snarl of rage.

"They... are... here..."

Ruthven paid no attention to the obvious as stated by his fellow scientist. His fury was a red, pulsing thing inside him, fed by his own helplessness. To be pinned here so near his goal, set up as a target for a mere machine, ate into him like a stream of deadly acid. His big gamble would puff out in a blast of fire to light up Topaz's sky, with nothing left--nothing. On the armrest of his sling-seat his nails scratched deep.

The four men in the control cabin could only sit and watch, waiting for the rendezvous which would blot them out. Ruthven's flaming anger was a futile blaze. His companion in the passenger seat had closed his eyes, his lips moving soundlessly. The pilot and his assistant divided their attention between the screen, with its appalling message, and the controls they could not effectively use, feverishly seeking a way out in these last moments.

Below them in the bowels of the ship were those who would not know the end consciously--save in one compartment. In a padded cage a prick-eared head stirred where it rested on forepaws, slitted eyes blinked, aware not only of familiar surroundings, but also of the tension and fear generated by human minds and emotions levels above. A pointed nose raised, and growling rose from a throat covered with thick buff-gray hair.

The growl aroused another similar captive. Knowing yellow eyes met yellow eyes. An intelligence, which was not natural to the animal body which contained it, fought down instinct raging to send both those

bodies hurtling at the fastenings of the twin cages. Curiosity and the ability to adapt had been bred into these creatures from time immemorial. Then something else had been added to sly and cunning brains. A step up had been taken--to weld intelligence to cunning, connect thought to instinct.

More than a generation earlier mankind had chosen barren desert--the "white sands" of New Mexico--as a testing ground for atomic experiments. Humankind could be barred, warded out of the radiation limits. The natural desert dwellers, four-footed and winged, could not be so controlled.

Thousands of years earlier, the first southward roving Amerindian tribes had met with their kind, a hunter of the open country, a smaller cousin of the wolf, whose natural abilities had made an indelible impression on the human mind. He appeared in countless Indian legends as the Shaper or the Trickster, sometimes friend, sometimes enemy. Godling for some tribes, father of all evil for others. In the wealth of tales the coyote, above all other animals, held pride of place.

Driven by the press of civilization into the badlands and deserts, fought with poison, gun, and trap, the coyote had survived, adapting to new ways with all his legendary cunning. Those who had reviled him as vermin had unwillingly added to the folklore which surrounded him, telling their own tales of robbed traps, skillful escapes. He continued to be a trickster, laughing on moonlit nights from the tops of ridges at those who would hunt him down.

Then, in the early twenty-first century, when myths were scoffed at, the stories of the coyote's slyness began once more on a fantastic scale. And finally scientists were sufficiently intrigued to seek out this creature that seemed to display in truth all the abilities credited to his immortal namesake by pre-Columbian tribes.

What they discovered was indeed shattering to certain closed minds. For the coyote had not only adapted to the country of the white sands; he had evolved into something which could not be dismissed as an animal, clever and cunning, but limited to beast range. Six cubs had been brought back on the first expedition, coyote in body, their developing minds different. The descendants of those cubs were now in the ship's cages, their mutated senses alert, ready for the slightest chance of escape. Sent to Topaz as eyes and ears for less keenly endowed humans, they were not completely under the domination of man. The range of their mental powers was still uncomprehended by those who had bred, trained, and worked with them from the days their eyes had opened and they had taken their first wobbly steps away from their dams.

The male growled again, his lips wrinkling back in a snarl as the emanations of fear from the men he could not see reached panic peak. He still crouched, belly flat, on the protecting pads of his cage; but he strove now to wriggle closer to the door, just as his mate made the same effort.

Between the animals and those in the control cabin lay the others--forty of them. Their bodies were cushioned and protected with every ingenious device known to those who had placed them there so many weeks earlier. Their minds were free of the ship, roving into places where men had not trod before, a territory potentially more dangerous than any solid earth could ever be.

Operation Retrograde had returned men bodily into the past, sending agents to hunt mammoths, follow the roads of the Bronze Age traders, ride with Attila and Genghis Khan, pull bows among the archers of ancient Egypt. But Redax returned men in mind to the paths of their ancestors, or this was the theory. And those who slept here and now in their narrow boxes, lay under its influence. The men who had arbitrarily set them on this course could only assume they were actually reliving the lives of Apache nomads in the wide southwestern wastes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Above, the pilot's hand pushed out again, fighting the pressure to reach one particular button. That, too, had been a last-minute addition, an experiment which had only received partial testing. To use it was the final move he could make, although he was already half convinced of its uselessness.

With no faith and only a wan hope, he depressed that round of metal flush with the board. What followed no one ever lived to explain.

At the planetside installation that tracked the missiles, a screen flared brightly enough to blind momentarily the man on watch, and the warden-globe was shaken off course. When it jiggled back into line it was no longer the efficient eye-in-the-sky it had been, though its tenders were not to realize that for an important minute or two.

While the ship, now out of control, sped in dizzy whirls toward Topaz, engines fought blindly to stabilize, to re-establish their functions. Some succeeded, some wobbled in and out of the danger zone, two failed. And in the control cabin three dead men spun imprisoned in their seats.

Dr. James Ruthven, blood bubbling from his lips with every shallow breath he could draw, fought the stealthy tide of blackness which crept up his brain, his stubborn will holding to rags of consciousness, refusing to acknowledge the pain of his fatally injured body.

The orbiting ship spun on an erratic path. Slowly its mechanisms were correcting, relays clicking, striving to bring it to a landing under

auto-pilot. All the ingenuity built into its computer was now centered in landing the globe.

It was not a good landing. The sphere touched a mountain side, scraped down rocks, shearing away a portion of its outer bulk. But the mountain barrier was now between it and the base from which the missiles had been launched, and the crash had not been recorded. As far as the watchers several hundred miles away knew, the warden in the sky had performed as promised. Their first line of defense had proven satisfactory. There had been no unauthorized landing on Topaz.

In the wreckage of the control cabin Ruthven pawed at the fastenings of his sling-chair. He no longer tried to suppress the moans every effort tore out of him. Time held the whip, drove him. He rolled from his seat to the floor, lay there gasping, as again he fought doggedly to remain above the waves--those frightening, fast-coming waves of darkness.

Somehow he was crawling, crawling along a tilted surface until he gained the well where the ladder to the lower section hung, now at an acute angle. That angle made it possible for him to reach the next level.

He was too dazed to realize the meaning of the crumpled bulkheads. There was a spur of bare rock under his hands as he edged over and around twisted metal. The moans were now a gobbling, burbling, almost continuous cry as he reached his goal--a small cabin still intact.

For long moments of anguish he paused by the chair there, afraid that he could not make the last effort, raise his almost inert bulk up to the point where he could reach the Redax release. For a second of unusual clarity he wondered if there was any reason for this supreme ordeal, whether any of the sleepers could be aroused. This might now be a ship of the dead.

His right hand, his arm, and finally his bulk over the seat, he braced himself and brought his left hand up. He could not use any of the fingers; it was like lifting numb, heavy weights. But he lurched forward, swept the unfeeling cold flesh down against the release in a gesture which he knew must be his final move. And, as he fell back to the floor, Dr. Ruthven could not be certain whether he had succeeded or failed. He tried to twist his head around, to focus his eyes upward at that switch. Was it down or still stubbornly up, locking the sleepers into confinement? But fog drifted between; he could not see it--or anything else.

The light in the cabin flickered and went out as another circuit in the broken ship failed. It was dark, too, in the small cubby below which housed the two cages. Chance, which had snuffed out nineteen lives in the space globe, had missed ripping open that cabin on the mountain side. Five yards down the corridor the outside fabric of the ship was split wide open, the crisp air native to Topaz entering, sending a message to