

CLASSICS TO GO

BRING BACK MY BRAIN!
AND DARK DESTINY



DWIGHT V. SWAIN

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Bring Back My Brain!

It was a world without a past or future; a shining shadow-world borne of sheer madness, a thousand echoing eternities beyond all space and time.

Now the pulsing radiance grew brighter—so bright it sent pain-tipped needles stabbing through Clark Dane's brain. He writhed under its relentless, throbbing pressure; tried to draw back, to cry out.

But the strange lethargy still clung to him, all-encumbering as a leaden pall. As in a nightmare, he lay prostrate, paralyzed, unable to move or speak.

Numbly, he wondered if he were dead.

Only then the silent laughter rose again—taunting; chilling—and he knew that life still stirred within him.

The face came with the laughter, floating through the swirling radiance as a shadow drifts through fog. Hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed, hairless as a sand-scoured, tide-washed skull, it hovered before Dane like a living death's-head, closer than ever before.

Where previously had he known this Being-Without-A-Name, Dane wondered? What malicious trick of circumstance had brought the two of them together?

Only those were things somehow beyond his powers of recall at the moment; questions that, strangely, seemed to find no answers within his aching brain.

Shuddering, he squeezed the eyes of his mind tight shut against the spectre.

But the face would not go away. Smirking, sardonic, evil, deep-lined with old sins, it hung motionless now, as if

mocking Dane in his torment while it reiterated its eternal theme: "I am your master, slave! Bow down! Bow down to your creator! Acknowledge your serfdom here and now!"

In spite of himself, Dane cringed.

"Say it, you fool! Say you are my slave!"

"No, damn you! Never; not ever...."

"You dare not deny me! You know it!" The malevolent eyes in the death's-head skull gleamed hot and bright as fire-jewels—probing, penetrating, skewering to the core of Dane's very brain. "Say it, I tell you! Say you are my slave!"

Dane's jaws ached with pressure. Desperately, he tried to fight the nightmare image from his mind.

"Acknowledge me, slave! I am your master!"

Dane's senses reeled. He was panting now. "I—I—"

"Say it!"

"I—am—your slave...."

Thin, cruel lips peeled back from stained teeth in a grimace of sadistic triumph. The soundless, soulless laughter rang forth louder than ever.

Dane sobbed aloud.

As if his reaction were a signal, the mocking face began to fade, back into the eddying radiance from whence it came. Where it had hung, a new shape rose.

Inanimate, this one; yet clean-cut and graceful as any living thing. Slim, silvery, needle-sharp, it poised like a gigantic lance flung skyward from its squat, buttressed base.

Dane's raw nerves calmed a fraction. The dream-pain ebbed away. Fascinated, he studied the shining shaft.

For even as he first glimpsed it, he knew in a rush that his life, his fate, his very being, somehow were linked tight to it.

Completely strange to him, it yet held intangible elements of familiarity beyond all ordinary knowledge.

Now the shaft seemed to drift closer, just as had the face before it, and Dane saw that a vertical slot ran almost its full length, from top to bottom, like a vastly-elongated needle-eye.

Slowly, while Dane watched, the shaft turned above its base. A second slot appeared, precisely like the first. Then a third. Through the openings, Dane glimpsed a maze of coils and wiring.

Frowning in spite of himself, he glanced down at the base, then stiffened.

For the shaft hung completely free in the air as if invisibly suspended from above, well clear of the metal-rimmed socket in its bed-plate!

A chill ran through Dane. Yet he could not tear his eyes away from the shining needle. It was almost as if another unheard voice, soundless as that of the vanished face, were hammering thoughts into his brain: "Heed well, Clark Dane! Let no detail escape you, lest the lack of it shall speed you to your doom! This shaft—it stands as symbol of all your dreams and hopes, your destiny...."

Then thought and image alike were fading; the face and its mind-voice back once more: "Remember, slave, I am your master, now and always! Dare to challenge me again and instant death shall be your doom!"

Never had the hollow eyes gleamed with such menace. Never had the bony, hairless face been etched more deeply with lines that spoke of ruthlessness and iniquity.

Slowly, reluctantly, Dane bowed his head. "I am your slave. You are my master."

But deep within him another voice was speaking in a savage, sullen whisper, so low as not even to reach the frontal lobes of his brain: "No! I'm not your slave! No man's my master! And some day, no matter what you threaten—some day, we'll see who dies!"

CHAPTER II

At first it seemed to Dane that he was racing through space, hurtling out in a whirling, swirling arc that left the whole solar system far behind. The stars, the galaxies, fell into chaos in his wake. New nebulae spread out before him, unseen by living eye until his advent.

Awe-struck, unable even to breathe, he could only stare at it all in unnerved wonder.

Then, slowly, that stage passed. Little by little, the void about him took on substance, until at last he found himself swimming somewhere far beneath the surface of a viscid sea ... fighting his way upward through the horror of dark, chimera-teeming depths inches at a time in that agonizing, snail-slow progression known only in the world of dreams.

But there came a moment when even swimming demanded too much effort. He floated, limp, rising slowly towards the daylight miles above him, free to the whim of every changing eddy of a foam-flecked, pale-green sea.

As from afar, then, a voice reached him dimly—a real voice, this time; one that spoke words aloud and face to face instead of only in the mind.

A woman's voice, surprisingly.

"I want him at the Record Center as fast as I can get him here," the voice said firmly. "That's why I'm coming out from Mars to make the pickup. There hasn't been a genuine case of amnesia reported from any of the inner planets in over a

hundred years, and I've no intention of letting this one slip by me."

Of a sudden the pale-green sea seemed to separate beneath Dane. It left him stranded on a smooth, level surface, resilient and not too hard.

Cautiously, he moved his fingers over it, recognized the texture of heavy synthetic kalor.

A bed, then.

The woman's voice went on, brisk and businesslike yet somehow intense: "I can't impress all of you too much with how important it is not to upset this man. Any shock prior to the complete celloscopic and hypnoanalytic examination we'll give him here might do untold damage—both to him, and to our chance of successfully working through his case."

Very carefully, Dane opened his eyes.

He looked out upon a dully glittering expanse of green telonium spaceship bulkhead. The viewing plate of a built-in visiscreen occupied a spot directly before him at eye level.

Centered on the plate was the image of the woman who was speaking.

Narrow-eyed, Dane studied her.

She had turned now to a concise discussion of technical details regarding amnesia—and that made the contrast between her words and her appearance all the more marked. For even over the visiscreen there was no denying her lithe, slender loveliness; and as Dane gazed up at the smooth oval of her face ... stared into her cool grey eyes ... he could visualize her in almost any role more easily than that of scientist or savant.

If he ever met her, perhaps he could persuade her to play a more feminine part.

It was a pleasant thought. But even as it struck Dane, the woman broke off. Her soft lips parted in a sudden, half-rueful smile. "I'm talking too much. You've better things to do than listen to my lectures, and—"

The click of a switch cut her off in mid-sentence. A harsh male voice snarled, "I'll say she talks too much! And for my part, I'm all through listening."

Dane shifted quickly; discovered for the first time that he shared the telonium chamber with three men grouped about a table: two in space-fleet uniform and one—the speaker—without.

The ununiformed man, squat and heavy-bodied, still gripped the visiscreen's remote control switch, his piggish, close-set eyes glazed hard with anger, his broad, lumpy face working.

The pig-eyes flicked to Dane as he turned. The lumpy face split in an ugly grin. "Well! Sleeping beauty's awake! Maybe we can come up with some answers of our own after all, before her royal highness from the Record Center gets here."

The man surged up as he spoke, flexing corded arms thick with coarse black hair. To Dane, he looked to be in his late twenties. His body bulged so heavy with muscle that his half-bald bullet-head seemed to grow directly from his shoulders.

But one of the space-fleet officers rose too. "Hold it, Pfaff!" he rapped. "Nelva Guthrie's given us our orders—and whether you like it or not, she's supervisor of the whole Mars Record Center. In a situation like this that gives her the rank to make what she says stick."

"Oh, does it, now?" sneered the man called Pfaff. "Personally, I always thought that where the Kalquoi were concerned, Security outranked anyone."

"The Kalquoi—?" The second space-fleet officer was on his feet now, gesturing. "Slow down a minute on that, Pfaff."

What have the Kalquoi got to do with this poor devil?"

"We picked him off an asteroid, didn't we?" the bullet-headed Pfaff slashed back belligerently. "If that doesn't tie him to the Kalquoi, what would it take? They've infiltrated the whole damn' belt, and you know it!"

"But just because he was marooned there—"

"Marooned, hell!" Pfaff hammered the butt of a rock-like fist against the doloid table. "Who marooned him, that's what I want to know! No man just pops up on an asteroid, naked as the day he was born, without even a breather mask for company!"

The two officers exchanged helpless glances.

"Answer me, you chitzas!" Pfaff bellowed. Again he smashed his great fist down upon the table. "I want to know who marooned him! And after you've told me that, I want to know who sent out the distress signal on him that we picked up. And who pumped that cave full of air and then slapped an energy seal on it so he'd have something to breathe till we got there. And finally, who"—a momentary pause while he snatched up an object from the table—"who left him this Kalquoi yat-stick to play with?"

"Well—" The first space-fleet officer groped futilely for words.

The second looked away, not speaking.

For a long moment Pfaff watched them—pig-eyes aglitter, bullet-head drawn far between the massive shoulders.

Then, slowly, his snarl changed to a smirk. He straightened; made a show of smoothing his rumpled short-sleeved, civilian tunic.

"For my money," he announced in a suddenly bland and unctuous voice "we've got no evidence whatever that this starbo"—a gesture to Dane—"is even human!"

In spite of himself, Dane went rigid. The officers' heads snapped round as if on springs. "What—?"

"You heard me." Pfaff was almost purring now. "The Kalquoi are shape-shifters; you know that. That's what makes them so dangerous. One minute, they'll be obviously alien—crystals floating in mid-air and radiating colored light like so many prisms. The next, one's a rock, another's a tal-string, and the third's bouncing around pretending to be the ball in a byul-game."

A thin thread of irritation began to creep through Dane. Unsteadily, he pulled himself to a sitting position and swung his legs over the edge of his cot. "Wait a minute, there—"

"Shut up, you stabat!" Pfaff threw out the command in the manner of a huecco-trainer addressing a particularly doltish pupil. And then, to the officers once more: "Don't you see? The brain-drain's stopped the Kalquoi cold. But supposing they could masquerade as humans, the way they do inanimate objects! Before we knew it, they'd take over the inner planets, the way they have the outer!"

Dane drew a deep, careful breath. "The only trouble is, I'm not a Kalquoi," he announced firmly.

"Oh." This time Pfaff turned to face him. "Then who are you, may I ask?"

"My name's Clark Dane."

"Clark Dane. Very good." Pfaff licked thick lips, as if enjoying the whole situation. "Now, tell us some other things: where you were born; who your parents were; your work assignment number; occupational classification; residence registration; how and why you came to be on the asteroid where we found you."

"Why, I—" Dane started to speak, then stopped short, groping. "I—I...."

"Yes, yes. Go on." Pfaff was grinning openly now, head thrust forward as he prodded.

A numbness crept through Dane. Desperately, he searched the farthest corners of his brain for answers to the other's questions.

Answers that just weren't there.

Pfaff chuckled; goaded: "It couldn't be you don't know, could it? Nor that you can't remember anything about the past except your name?"

Dane didn't answer. Bewilderment; confusion; sheer, stark panic—they roiled within him; put knots in the pit of his stomach and made his head reel till he had to cling to the edge of the cot for fear of falling.

Again Pfaff chuckled. "Maybe I'm being too hard on you, Dane." His mockery seared like acid. "If so, I'll apologize. Just prove to me you're not a Kalquoi; that's all I ask."

"Damn it, Pfaff!" the officer nearest to Dane exploded. "You heard what Nelva Guthrie said: any shock's liable to tie this man up permanently. Quit plaguing him!"

Pfaff's air of mock-cordiality fell away like a discarded mask. "Is that an order, lieutenant?" he demanded belligerently. "Are you telling me what I can and can't do?"

The other's lips drew tight. "Now wait a minute, Pfaff—"

"No! You wait!" Pfaff thrust his bullet-head forward, close to the officer's face. "This is a matter of principle, mister. We'll settle it right now. I'm Security rep on this ship, and I say this Clark Dane pickup's a Security matter. Are you going to contradict me?"

"If need be." The lieutenant's cheeks flamed. "It so happens, Mr. Pfaff, that you've pushed your luck a little too far. Security rep or not, you're overstepping your authority, and

I'm not about to stand for it. If need be, I'll take it clear to the captain."

"Well! So it's out in the open at last!" Pig-eyes glittering, thick lips twisted in an ugly grin, Pfaff moved in even closer. "You've got a good idea there, too—that business of taking all this to the captain. We'll do it. And then, after that, we'll carry it another step, to a friend of mine. You may have heard of him. His name's Thorburg Jessup."

"Thorburg Jessup—!" The lieutenant's nostrils flared. His eyes distended.

Then, of a sudden, the angry color was draining from his face. Uncertainly, he fell back a step. "Now wait a minute, Pfaff—"

It was as if the other hadn't even heard him. "Did you think you were going to get away with it, lieutenant? Did you really?" The Security rep exploded in a roar of contemptuous, scorn-ringing laughter. "Let me tell you something, mister. The blocked-promotion stations are full of brass-braided jackasses who thought they could lock horns with Security reps. Because the minute an officer talks back or pokes his nose into Security business, the rep calls Jessup—and that's the end of the trouble *and* the officer."

For a long, taut moment, then, the silence echoed; a leaden silence, heavy with tension.

"Well, lieutenant?" Pfaff cocked his head. "Which is it going to be? Do you shut up—or do I call Thorburg Jessup?"

The spaceship officer seemed to stop breathing. Then, abruptly, he pivoted and, wordless, stalked from the room.

Not speaking, Pfaff turned his cold, unblinking stare upon the second officer.

The man's gaze faltered; fell. He followed his fellow from the chamber.

Now Pfaff swung round to face Dane, lumpy features aglow with unholy triumph. Slowly, contemplatively, he scrubbed a meaty palm back and forth through the coarse black hair that matted the opposite forearm.

It made a whispering, scratching sort of sound that rasped Dane's nerves worse than all the earlier verbal pyrotechnics. Uneasily, he shifted; swallowed.

Because strive as he might, he still couldn't remember. Not anything.

The realization brought with it a feeling more frightening than anything he'd ever known. It was as if the world—his private world—had vanished, leaving him cast adrift in space blindfolded, without landmarks or triangulation points, all orientation lost.

The sense of helplessness that came with it was almost more than he could bear. Sheer lack of knowledge half-paralyzed him. Desperately, he wondered what he should do; how his role and true identity called for him to react.

Still gloating, Pfaff leaned back; rested his heavy hams against the doloid table. "Well, bucko?" he prodded.

With an effort, Dane held his voice steady. "I can't tell you what I don't know. All those questions—I simply don't remember."

"Nor this thing? You don't remember it, either?"

As he spoke, the Security rep picked up the Kalquoi yat-stick from the table and held it out for Dane's inspection.

Frowning, Dane studied it. A good foot long, Earth measurement, and purplish in hue, it was formed of some heavy alien metal. The basic outline was that of a slingshot crotch—a sort of handle that forked into two prongs to form a Y. But a bar across the top closed the fork, and a continuation of the handle came up to meet the bar at right

angles, making a T. Bracing members from the point where the stem of the T met the crosspiece ran to the middle of each arm of the Y, then in their turn were joined into a triangle by another crosspiece.

With a little imagination, Dane saw, it would be easy enough to vision the unit in its entirety as forming a word or syllable, YAT.

"It's a funny thing," Pfaff observed with an emphasis anything but mirthful. "No one knows just what these gadgets are for. The best the extraterrestrial ethnologists can come up with is a lot of thes-gas about symbolism and religious significance. That stuff I wouldn't know about. But one thing's for sure: where you find yat-sticks, you find Kalquoi."

Dane made no comment.

"This one," Pfaff pressed, extending the yat-stick, "was lying half under you in that cave where we picked you up."

Dane shrugged.

"That's all you've got to say? You won't tell me any more about it?"

"What can I tell you?" Dane came back wearily. "Don't you understand? I don't know. I can't remember."

The Security rep's broad face drew into a chill, expressionless mask. His bullet-head sank deeper between his shoulders.

"All right," he clipped harshly, flinging the yat-stick back down upon the table. "You want it hard, I'll give it to you that way. This is a survey ship. Start talking, or I'll have 'em throw you in the bem-tank."

"The bem-tank—?" Dane stared.

"Don't give me that! You know what I mean! Survey ships bring in samples of extraterrestrial life—the kind of bug-eyed monsters that give a man nightmares even to think about. What they do to you if they get the chance shouldn't happen to a quontab."

A chill ran through Dane. "But I don't know—"

"Tell it to the bems!" Already, Pfaff was jamming his thumb down on a buzzer button. "You had your chance, you stabat! Now we'll play it my way. You and the narcoanalyst and that vidal Nelva Guthrie—you'll see who's got the answers!"

Dane's panic was like a light-lance beam twisting in his midriff. "Please—!" he choked. "Please...."

Pfaff laughed aloud.

Dane stopped short in mid-breath. The goading, the mockery, the pig-eyes, the harsh voice, the badgering—all these he'd taken.

But the laugh went one step beyond his limit of endurance.

In the fraction of a second his panic turned to roiling, boiling rage.

What did it matter if he didn't know who he was or from whence he came? Why should he care if his past was a blank, his future a question-mark?

Why indeed—so long as for this one moment he had a course to follow!

Such a course as erasing the grin from Pfaff's thick lips, for example.

And after that—well, he'd play the other moments as they came along, without regard for past or future.

Savagely, then, he lunged up from the cot, straight at the still-laughing Pfaff.

For the barest instant the Security rep stood frozen, eyes blank with startlement. Then, with surprising agility for his heavy-bodied bulk, the man tried to twist aside, out of the way of Dane's rush.

His hip hit the doloid table. He stumbled.

Before he could recover, Dane smashed a fist home to the blubbery lips; felt them spurt blood as they crushed against Pfaff's teeth.

The Security rep reeled. Heart surging with fierce elation, Dane followed up, hammering home a rain of blows to head and body alike.

For an instant the other fell back—head down, hairy arms hugged close to protect the bulging belly.

But only for an instant. Then, with a harsh roar, the bullet-head came up again. A fist like a maul swept out in a wide arc, bruising Dane's rib-cage. Another blow caught his shoulders; rocked him back on his heels.

Desperately, Dane threw himself sidewise, barely clear of the other's lunge, and let fly a rabbit-punch.

It landed solidly, but it was still a waste of effort. Pfaff spun about with no sign that he had even been hit, and once again, lunged for Dane.

Taking advantage of his longer reach, Dane drove in a quick one-two to Pfaff's face, then started to leap back, away from the other's charge.

But this time it was he who forgot the doloid table. Careening against it, he staggered for a moment off balance.

The next instant Pfaff buried a fist in the pit of Dane's belly. Retching, half-paralyzed, Dane lurched backward; slumped to the floor.

A roar of triumph from Pfaff. He launched a kick powered to break a man's back.

With a tremendous heave, Dane writhed clear just in time.

But already the Security man was kicking again—a bruising, thigh-grazing blow that tore a choked cry from Dane's throat. In desperation he rolled back and under the table, hoping against hope to avoid the other's murderous feet.

Cursing, Pfaff heaved at the table, wrenching the nearest leg clear of its anchor bracket. "You chitza!" he panted, "I'll kill you! D'you hear me? I'll kill you!"

He meant it. It showed in every line and corded, bulging muscle. Stark murder gleamed in his tiny, close-set pig-eyes ... glistened in the flecks of bloody foam at the mouth-corners and in the sweat-greased folds of the contorted face.

Spasmodically, Dane dragged himself to his feet on the far side of the wrenched, warped table.

Panting, Pfaff tried to reach him; then, failing, clawed for the heavy Kalquoi yat-stick that still lay on the slab between them.

With all his might, Dane heaved at the already-sagging table. The yat-stick slid to the floor on his side.

Pfaff hurled himself after it bodily. Jamming him aside, Dane snatched up the stick and swung it in a tight arc, straight for the base of the Security rep's skull.

Pfaff twisted and it hit—snapped—a collarbone instead.

In the same instant the chamber's door swung open. Two space-fleet guards gaped across the threshold.

Face twisted with pain, clutching at his shattered clavicle, Pfaff roared, "Get this stabat!"

Dane lunged for the doorway, swinging the yat-stick. It clipped the first guard alongside the jaw; dropped him in his